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UNDER THE RED ROBE

"Undoubtedly," I replied, "if he prefers to be Caned in the Streets."

—*Page 3.*

UNDER THE RED ROBE

BY

STANLEY WEYMAN

AUTHOR OF 'A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE,' 'THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF'
'THE STORY OF FRANCIS CLUDDE'

ILLUSTRATED BY R. CATON WOODVILLE

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UNDER THE RED ROBE

CHAPTER I

AT ZATON'S

'MARKED CARDS!'

There were a score round us when the fool, little knowing the man with whom he had to deal, and as little how to lose like a gentleman, flung the words in my teeth. He thought, I'll be sworn, that I should storm and swear and ruffle it like any common cock of the hackle. But that was never Gil de Berault's way. For a few seconds after he had spoken I did not even look at him. I passed my eye instead—smiling, *bien entendu*—round the ring of waiting faces, saw that there was no one except De

Pombal I had cause to fear; and then at last I rose and looked at the fool with the grim face I have known impose on older and wiser men.

'Marked cards, M. l'Anglais?' I said, with a chilling sneer. 'They are used, I am told, to trap players—not unbirched schoolboys.'

'Yet I say that they are marked!' he replied hotly, in his queer foreign jargon. 'In my last hand I had nothing. You doubled the stakes. Bah, sir, you knew! You have swindled me!'

'Monsieur is easy to swindle—when he plays with a mirror behind him,' I answered tartly.

At that there was a great roar of laughter, which might have been heard in the street, and which brought to the table everyone in the eating-house whom his voice had not already attracted. But I did not relax my face. I waited until all was quiet again, and then waving aside two or three who stood between us and the entrance, I pointed gravely to the door.

'There is a little space behind the church of St Jacques, M. l'Etranger,' I said, putting on my hat

and taking my cloak on my arm. 'Doubtless you will accompany me thither?'

He snatched up his hat, his face burning with shame and rage.

'With pleasure!' he blurted out. 'To the devil, if you like!'

I thought the matter arranged, when the Marquis laid his hand on the young fellow's arm and checked him.

'This must not be,' he said, turning from him to me with his grand, fine-gentleman's air. 'You know me, M. de Berault. This matter has gone far enough.'

'Too far! M. de Pombal,' I answered bitterly 'Still, if you wish to take your friend's place, I shall raise no objection.'

'Chut, man!' he retorted, shrugging his shoulders negligently. 'I know you, and I do not fight with men of your stamp. Nor need this gentleman.'

'Undoubtedly,' I replied, bowing low, 'if he prefers to be caned in the streets.'

That stung the Marquis.

'Have a care! have a care!' he cried hotly. 'You go too far, M. Berault.'

'De Berault, if you please,' I objected, eyeing him sternly. 'My family has borne the *de* as long as yours, M. de Pombal.'

He could not deny that, and he answered, 'As you please;' at the same time restraining his friend by a gesture. 'But none the less,' he continued, 'take my advice. The Cardinal has forbidden duelling, and this time he means it! You have been in trouble once and gone free. A second time it may fare worse with you. Let this gentleman go, therefore, M. de Berault. Besides—why, shame upon you, man!' he exclaimed hotly; 'he is but a lad!'

Two or three who stood behind me applauded that. But I turned and they met my eye; and they were as mum as mice.

'His age is his own concern,' I said grimly. 'He was old enough a while ago to insult me.'

'And I will prove my words!' the lad cried, exploding at last. He had spirit enough, and the Marquis had had hard work to restrain him

so long. 'You do me no service, M. de Pombal,' he continued, pettishly shaking off his friend's hand. 'By your leave, this gentleman and I will settle this matter.'

'That is better,' I said, nodding drily, while the Marquis stood aside, frowning and baffled. 'Permit me to lead the way.'

Zaton's eating-house stands scarcely a hundred paces from St Jacques la Boucherie, and half the company went thither with us. The evening was wet, the light in the streets was waning, the streets themselves were dirty and slippery. There were few passers in the Rue St Antoine; and our party, which earlier in the day must have attracted notice and a crowd, crossed unmarked, and entered without interruption the paved triangle which lies immediately behind the church. I saw in the distance one of the Cardinal's guard loitering in front of the scaffolding round the new Hôtel Richelieu; and the sight of the uniform gave me pause for a moment. But it was too late to repent.

The Englishman began at once to strip off his

clothes. I closed mine to the throat, for the air was chilly. At that moment, while we stood preparing, and most of the company seemed a little inclined to stand off from me, I felt a hand on my arm, and, turning, saw the dwarfish tailor at whose house, in the Rue Savonnerie, I lodged at the time. The fellow's presence was unwelcome, to say the least of it; and though for want of better company I had sometimes encouraged him to be free with me at home, I took that to be no reason why I should be plagued with him before gentlemen. I shook him off, therefore, hoping by a frown to silence him.

He was not to be so easily put down, however, and perforce I had to speak to him.

'Afterwards, afterwards,' I said hurriedly. 'I am engaged now.'

'For God's sake, don't, sir!' the poor fool cried, clinging to my sleeve. 'Don't do it! You will bring a curse on the house. He is but a lad, and—'

'You, too!' I exclaimed, losing patience. 'Be

silent, you scum! What do you know about gentlemen's quarrels? Leave me; do you hear?'

'But the Cardinal!' he cried in a quavering voice. 'The Cardinal, M. de Berault! The last man you killed is not forgotten yet. This time he will be sure to—'

'Leave me, do you hear?' I hissed. The fellow's impudence passed all bounds. It was as bad as his croaking. 'Begone!' I added. 'I suppose you are afraid that he will kill me, and you will lose your money.'

Frison fell back at that almost as if I had struck him, and I turned to my adversary, who had been awaiting my motions with impatience. God knows he did look young as he stood with his head bare and his fair hair drooping over his smooth woman's forehead—a mere lad fresh from the college of Burgundy, if they have such a thing in England. I felt a sudden chill as I looked at him: a qualm, a tremor, a presentiment. What was it the little tailor had said? That I should—but there, he did not know. What did he know of such things? If I let

this pass I must kill a man a day, or leave Paris and the eating-house, and starve.

'A thousand pardons,' I said gravely, as I drew and took my place. 'A dun. I am sorry that the poor devil caught me so inopportunely. Now, however, I am at your service.'

He saluted and we crossed swords and began. But from the first I had no doubt what the result would be. The slippery stones and fading light gave him, it is true, some chance, some advantage, more than he deserved; but I had no sooner felt his blade than I knew that he was no swordsman. Possibly he had taken half-a-dozen lessons in rapier art, and practised what he learned with an Englishman as heavy and awkward as himself. But that was all. He made a few wild clumsy rushes, parrying widely. When I had foiled these, the danger was over, and I held him at my mercy.

I played with him a little while, watching the sweat gather on his brow, and the shadow of the church tower fall deeper and darker, like the shadow of doom, on his face. Not out of cruelty

—God knows I have never erred in that direction! —but because, for the first time in my life, I felt a strange reluctance to strike the blow. The curls clung to his forehead; his breath came and went in gasps; I heard the men behind me murmur, and one or two of them drop an oath; and then I slipped—slipped, and was down in a moment on my right side, my elbow striking the pavement so sharply that the arm grew numb to the wrist.

He held off. I heard a dozen voices cry, 'Now! now you have him!' But he held off. He stood back and waited with his breast heaving and his point lowered, until I had risen and stood again on my guard.

'Enough! enough!' a rough voice behind me cried. 'Don't hurt the man after that.'

'On guard, sir!' I answered coldly—for he seemed to waver, and be in doubt. 'It was an accident. It shall not avail you again.'

Several voices cried 'Shame!' and one, 'You coward!' But the Englishman stepped forward, a fixed look in his blue eyes. He took his place

without a word. I read in his drawn white face that he had made up his mind to the worst, and his courage so won my admiration that I would gladly and thankfully have set one of the lookers-on—any of the lookers-on—in his place ; but that could not be. So I thought of Zaton's closed to me, of Pombal's insult, of the sneers and slights I had long kept at the sword's point; and, pressing him suddenly in a heat of affected anger, I thrust strongly over his guard, which had grown feeble, and ran him through the chest.

When I saw him lying, laid out on the stones with his eyes half shut, and his face glimmering white in the dusk—not that I saw him thus long, for there were a dozen kneeling round him in a twinkling—I felt an unwonted pang. It passed however, in a moment. For I found myself confronted by a ring of angry faces—of men who, keeping at a distance, hissed and cursed and threatened me, calling me Black Death and the like.

They were mostly canaille, who had gathered during the fight, and had viewed all that passed

from the farther side of the railings. While some snarled and raged at me like wolves, calling me 'Butcher!' and 'Cut-throat!' or cried out that Berault was at his trade again, others threatened me with the vengeance of the Cardinal, flung the edict in my teeth, and said with glee that the guard were coming—they would see me hanged yet.

'His blood is on your head!' one cried furiously. 'He will be dead in an hour. And you will swing for him! Hurrah!'

'Begone,' I said.

'Ay,' to Montfaucon, he answered, mocking me.

'No; to your kennel!' I replied, with a look which sent him a yard backwards, though the railings were between us. And I wiped my blade carefully, standing a little apart. For—well, I could understand it—it was one of those moments when a man is not popular. Those who had come with me from the eating-house eyed me askance, and turned their backs when I drew nearer; and those who had joined us

and obtained admission were scarcely more polite.

'But I was not to be outdone in *sang froid.* I cocked my hat, and drawing my cloak over my shoulders, went out with a swagger which drove the curs from the gate before I came within a dozen paces of it. The rascals outside fell back as quickly, and in a moment I was in the street. Another moment and I should have been clear of the place and free to lie by for a while—when, without warning, a scurry took place round me. The crowd fled every way into the gloom, and in a hand-turn a dozen of the Cardinal's guards closed round me.

I had some acquaintance with the officer in command, and he saluted me civilly.

'This is a bad business, M. de Berault,' he said. 'The man is dead they tell me.'

'Neither dying nor dead,' I answered lightly. 'If that be all you may go home again.'

'With you, he replied, with a grin, 'certainly And as it rains, the sooner the better. I must ask you for your sword, I am afraid.'

'Take it,' I said, with the philosophy which never deserts me. 'But the man will not die.'

'I hope that may avail you,' he answered in a tone I did not like. 'Left wheel, my friends! To the Châtelet! March!'

'There are worse places,' I said, and resigned myself to fate. After all, I had been in a prison before, and learned that only one jail lets no prisoner escape.

But when I found that my friend's orders were to hand me over to the watch, and that I was to be confined like any common jail-bird caught cutting a purse or slitting a throat, I confess my heart sank. If I could get speech with the Cardinal, all would probably be well; but if I failed in this, or if the case came before him in strange guise, or if he were in a hard mood himself, then it might go ill with me. The edict said, death!

And the lieutenant at the Châtelet did not put himself to much trouble to hearten me. 'What! again, M. de Berault?' he said, raising

his eyebrows as he received me at the gate, and recognised me by the light of the brazier which his men were just kindling outside. 'You are a very bold man, or a very foolhardy one, to come here again. The old business, I suppose?'

'Yes, but he is not dead,' I answered coolly. 'He has a trifle—a mere scratch. It was behind the church of St Jacques.'

'He looked dead enough, my friend,' the guardsman interposed. He had not yet left us.

'Bah!' I answered scornfully. 'Have you ever known me make a mistake? When I kill a man I kill him. I put myself to pains, I tell you, not to kill this Englishman. Therefore he will live.'

'I hope so,' the lieutenant said, with a dry smile. 'And you had better hope so, too, M. de Berault. For if not—'

'Well?' I said, somewhat troubled. 'If not, what, my friend?'

'I fear he will be the last man you will fight,' he answered. 'And even if he lives, I would

not be too sure, my friend. This time the Cardinal is determined to put it down.'

'He and I are old friends,' I said confidently.

'So I have heard,' he answered, with a short laugh. 'I think that the same was said of Chalais. I do not remember that it saved his head.'

This was not reassuring. But worse was to come. Early in the morning orders were received that I should be treated with especial strictness, and I was given the choice between irons and one of the cells below the level. Choosing the latter, I was left to reflect upon many things; among others, on the queer and uncertain nature of the Cardinal, who loved, I knew, to play with a man as a cat with a mouse; and on the ill effects which sometimes attend a high chest-thrust however carefully delivered. I only rescued myself at last from these and other unpleasant reflections by obtaining the loan of a pair of dice; and the light being just enough to enable me to reckon the throws, I amused myself for hours by casting

them on certain principles of my own. But a long run again and again upset my calculations; and at last brought me to the conclusion that a run of bad luck may be so persistent as to see out the most sagacious player. This was not a reflection very welcome to me at the moment.

Nevertheless, for three days it was all the company I had. At the end of that time, the knave of a jailor who attended me, and who had never grown tired of telling me, after the fashion of his kind, that I should be hanged, came to me with a less assured air.

'Perhaps you would like a little water?' he said civilly.

'Why, rascal?' I asked.

'To wash with,' he answered.

'I asked for some yesterday, and you would not bring it,' I grumbled. 'However, better late than never. Bring it now. If I must hang, I will hang like a gentleman. But, depend upon it, the Cardinal will not serve an old friend so scurvy a trick.'

'You are to go to him,' he announced, when he came back with the water.

'What? To the Cardinal?' I cried.

'Yes,' he answered.

'Good!' I exclaimed; and in my joy and relief I sprang up at once, and began to refresh my dress. 'So all this time I have been doing him an injustice,' I continued. '*Vive Monseigneur!* Long live the little Bishop of Luchon! I might have known it, too.'

'Don't make too sure!' the man answered spitefully. Then he went on, 'I have something else for you. A friend of yours left it at the gate,' and he handed me a packet.

'Quite so!' I said, reading his rascally face aright. 'And you kept it as long as you dared —as long as you thought I should hang, you knave! Was not that so? But there, do not lie to me. Tell me instead which of my friends left it.' For, to confess the truth, I had not so many friends at this time; and ten good crowns —the packet contained no less a sum—argued a pretty staunch friend, and one of whom a man might reasonably be proud.

The knave sniggered maliciously. 'A crooked dwarfish man left it,' he said. 'I doubt I might call him a tailor and not be far out.'

'Chut!' I answered—but I was a little out of countenance, nevertheless. 'I understand. An honest fellow enough, and in debt to me! I am glad he remembered. But when am I to go, friend?'

'In an hour,' he answered sullenly. Doubtless he had looked to get one of the crowns; but I was too old a hand for that. If I came back I could buy his services; and if I did not I should have wasted my money.

Nevertheless, a little later, when I found myself on my way to the Hôtel Richelieu under so close a guard that I could see nothing in the street except the figures that immediately surrounded me, I wished that I had given him the money. At such times, when all hangs in the balance and the sky is overcast, the mind runs on luck and old superstitions, and is prone to think a crown given here may avail there — though *there* be a hundred leagues away.

The Palais Richelieu was at this time in building, and we were required to wait in a long, bare gallery, where the masons were at work. I was kept a full hour here, pondering uncomfortably on the strange whims and fancies of the great man who then ruled France as the King's Lieutenant-General, with all the King's powers, and whose life I had once been the means of saving by a little timely information. On occasion he had done something to wipe out the debt; and at other times he had permitted me to be free with him, and so far we were not unknown to one another.

Nevertheless, when the doors were at last thrown open, and I was led into his presence, my confidence underwent a shock. His cold glance, that, roving over me, regarded me not as a man but an item, the steely glitter of his southern eyes, chilled me to the bone. The room was bare, the floor without carpet or covering. Some of the woodwork lay about, unfinished and in pieces. But the man—this man, needed no surroundings. His keen pale face, his brilliant eyes, even his presence

—though he was of no great height, and began already to stoop at the shoulders—were enough to awe the boldest. I recalled, as I looked at him, a hundred tales of his iron will, his cold heart, his unerring craft. He had humbled the King's brother, the splendid Duke of Orleans, in the dust. He had curbed the Queen-mother. A dozen heads, the noblest in France, had come to the block through him. Only two years before he had quelled Rochelle; only a few months before he had crushed the great insurrection in Languedoc: and though the south, stripped of its old privileges, still seethed with discontent, no one in this year 1630 dared lift a hand against him—openly, at at any rate. Under the surface a hundred plots a thousand intrigues, sought his life or his power; but these, I suppose, are the hap of every great man.

No wonder, then, that the courage on which I plumed myself sank low at sight of him; or that it was as much as I could do to mingle with the humility of my salute some touch of the *sangfroid* of old acquaintanceship.

And perhaps that had been better left out. For it seemed that this man was without bowels. For a moment, while he stood looking at me, and before he spoke to me, I gave myself up for lost. There was a glint of cruel satisfaction in his eyes that warned me, before he opened his mouth, what he was going to say to me.

'I could not have made a better catch, M. de Berault,' he said, smiling villainously, while he gently smoothed the fur of a cat that had sprung on the table beside him. 'An old offender, and an excellent example. I doubt it will not stop with you. But later, we will make you the warrant for flying at higher game.

'Monseigneur has handled a sword himself,' I blurted out. The very room seemed to be growing darker, the air colder. I was never nearer fear in my life.

'Yes?' he said, smiling delicately. 'And so—?'

'Will not be too hard on the failings of a poor gentleman.'

'He shall suffer no more than a rich one,' he

replied suavely as he stroked the cat. 'Enjoy that satisfaction, M. de Berault. Is that all?'

'Once I was of service to your Eminence,' I said desperately.

'Payment has been made,' he answered, 'more than once. But for that I should not have seen you.'

'The King's face!' I cried, snatching at the straw he seemed to hold out.

He laughed cynically, smoothly. His thin face, his dark moustache, and whitening hair, gave him an air of indescribable keenness.

'I am not the King,' he said. 'Besides, I am told that you have killed as many as six men in duels. You owe the King, therefore, one life at least. You must pay it. There is no more to be said, M. de Berault,' he continued coldly, turning away and beginning to collect some papers. 'The law must take its course.'

I thought that he was about to nod to the lieutenant to withdraw me, and a chilling sweat broke out down my back. I saw the scaffold, I felt the cords. A moment, and it would be too late!

'I have a favour to ask,' I stammered desperately, 'if your Eminence will give me a moment alone.'

'To what end?' he answered, turning and eyeing me with cold disfavour. 'I know you—your past—all. It can do no good, my friend.'

'No harm!' I cried. 'And I am a dying man, Monseigneur!'

'That is true,' he said thoughtfully. Still he seemed to hesitate; and my heart beat fast. At last he looked at the lieutenant. 'You may leave us,' he said shortly. 'Now,' he continued, when the officer had withdrawn and left us alone, 'What is it? Say what you have to say quickly. And, above all, do not try to fool me, M. de Berault.'

But his piercing eyes so disconcerted me now that I had my chance, and was alone with him, that I could not find a word to say, and stood before him mute. I think this pleased him, for his face relaxed.

'Well?' he said at last. 'Is that all?'

'The man is not dead,' I muttered.

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

'What of that?' he said. 'That was not what you wanted to say to me.'

'Once I saved your Eminence's life,' I faltered miserably.

'Admitted,' he answered, in his thin, incisive voice. 'You mentioned the fact before. On the other hand, you have taken six to my knowledge, M. de Berault. You have lived the life of a bully, a common bravo, a gamester. You, a man of family! For shame! Do you wonder that it has brought you to this? Yet on that one point I am willing to hear more,' he added abruptly.

'I might save your Eminence's life again,' I cried. It was a sudden inspiration.

'You know something?' he said quickly, fixing me with his eyes. 'But no,' he continued, shaking his head gently. 'Pshaw! The trick is old. I have better spies than you, M. de Berault.'

'But no better sword,' I cried hoarsely. 'No, not in all your guard!'

'That is true,' he said slowly. 'That is true.

To my surprise, he spoke in a tone of consideration; and he looked down at the floor. 'Let me think, my friend,' he continued.

He walked two or three times up and down the room, while I stood trembling. I confess it, trembling. The man whose pulses danger has no power to quicken, is seldom proof against suspense; and the sudden hope his words awakened in me so shook me that his figure as he trod lightly to and fro with the cat rubbing against his robe and turning time for time with him, wavered before my eyes. I grasped the table to steady myself. I had not admitted even in my own mind how darkly the shadow of Montfaucon and the gallows had fallen across me.

I had leisure to recover myself, for it was some time before he spoke. When he did, it was in a voice harsh, changed, imperative. 'You have the reputation of a man faithful, at least, to his employer,' he said. 'Do not answer me. I say it is so. Well, I will trust you. I will give you one more chance—though it is a desperate one. Woe to you if you fail me! Do

you know Cocheforêt in Béarn? It is not far from Auch.'

'No, your Eminence.'

'Nor M. de Cocheforêt?'

'No, your Eminence.'

'So much the better,' he replied. 'But you have heard of him. He has been engaged in every Gascon plot since the late King's death, and gave more trouble last year in the Vivarais than any man twice his years. At present he is at Bosost in Spain, with other refugees, but I have learned that at frequent intervals he visits his wife at Cocheforêt, which is six leagues within the border. On one of these visits he must be arrested.'

'That should be easy,' I said.

The Cardinal looked at me. 'Chut, man! what do you know about it?' he answered bluntly. 'It is whispered at Cocheforêt if a soldier crosses the street at Auch. In the house are only two or three servants, but they have the countryside with them to a man, and they are a dangerous breed. A spark might kindle a fresh

rising. The arrest, therefore, must be made secretly.'

I bowed.

'One resolute man inside the house,' the Cardinal continued, thoughtfully glancing at a paper which lay on the table, 'with the help of two or three servants whom he could summon to his aid at will, might effect it. The question is, Will you be the man, my friend?'

I hesitated; then I bowed. What choice had I?

'Nay, nay, speak out!' he said sharply. 'Yes or no, M. de Berault?'

'Yes, your Eminence,' I said reluctantly. Again, I say, what choice had I?

'You will bring him to Paris, and alive. He knows things, and that is why I want him. You understand?'

'I understand, Monseigneur,' I answered.

'You will get into the house as you can,' he continued with energy. 'For that you will need strategy, and good strategy. They suspect everybody. You must deceive them. If you fail to deceive them, or, deceiving them, are found out

later, I do not think that you will trouble me again, or break the edict a second time. On the other hand, should you deceive *me*'—he smiled still more subtly, but his voice sank to a purring note—'I will break you on the wheel like the ruined gamester you are!'

I met his look without quailing. 'So be it!' I said, recklessly. 'If I do not bring M. de Cocheforêt to Paris, you may do that to me, and more also!'

'It is a bargain!' he answered slowly. 'I think that you will be faithful. For money, here are a hundred crowns. That sum should suffice; but if you succeed you shall have twice as much more. That is all, I think. You understand?'

'Yes, Monseigneur.'

'Then why do you wait?'

'The lieutenant?' I said modestly.

The Cardinal laughed to himself, and sitting down wrote a word or two on a slip of paper. 'Give him that,' he said in high good-humour. 'I fear, M. de Berault, you will never get your deserts—in this world!'

CHAPTER II

AT THE GREEN PILLAR

COCHÊFORET lies in a billowy land of oak and beech and chestnuts—a land of deep, leafy bottoms and hills clothed with forest. Ridge and valley, glen and knoll, the woodland, sparsely peopled and more sparsely tilled, stretches away to the great snow mountains that here limit France. It swarms with game—with wolves and bears, deer and boars. To the end of his life I have heard that the great king loved this district, and would sigh, when years and State fell heavily on him, for the beech groves and box-covered hills of South Béarn. From the terraced steps of Auch you can see the forest roll away in light and shadow, vale and upland, to the base of the snow peaks; and, though I come from Brittany and love the smell

of the salt wind, I have seen few sights that outdo this.

It was the second week of October, when I came to Cocheforêt, and, dropping down from the last wooded brow, rode quietly into the place at evening. I was alone, and had ridden all day in a glory of ruddy beech leaves, through the silence of forest roads, across clear brooks and glades still green. I had seen more of the quiet and peace of the country than had been my share since boyhood, and for that reason, or because I had no great taste for the task before me—the task now so imminent—I felt a little hipped. In good faith, it was not a gentleman's work that I was come to do, look at it how you might.

But beggars must not be choosers, and I knew that this feeling would not last. At the inn, in the presence of others, under the spur of necessity, or in the excitement of the chase, were that once begun, I should lose the feeling. When a man is young he seeks solitude, when he is middle-aged, he flies it and his thoughts. I made therefore for the 'Green Pillar,' a little

I MADE, THEREFORE, FOR THE GREEN PILLAR, A LITTLE INN IN THE VILLAGE STREET.

inn in the village street, to which I had been directed at Auch, and, thundering on the door with the knob of my riding switch, railed at the man for keeping me waiting.

Here and there at hovel doors in the street—which was a mean, poor place, not worthy of the name—men and women looked out at me suspiciously. But I affected to ignore them; and at last the host came. He was a fair-haired man, half-Basque, half-Frenchman, and had scanned me well, I was sure, through some window or peephole; for when he came out he betrayed no surprise at the sight of a well-dressed stranger—a portent in that out-of-the-way village—but eyed me with a kind of sullen reserve.

'I can lie here to-night, I suppose?' I said, dropping the reins on the sorrel's neck. The horse hung its head.

'I don't know,' he answered stupidly.

I pointed to the green bough which topped a post that stood opposite the door.

'This is an inn, is it not?' I said.

'Yes,' he answered slowly. 'It is an inn. But—'

'But you are full, or you are out of food, or your wife is ill, or something else is amiss,' I answered peevishly. 'All the same, I am going to lie here. So you must make the best of it, and your wife too—if you have one.'

He scratched his head, looking at me with an ugly glitter in his eyes. But he said nothing, and I dismounted.

'Where can I stable my horse?' I asked.

'I'll put it up,' he answered sullenly, stepping forward and taking the reins in his hand.

'Very well,' I said. 'But I go with you. A merciful man is merciful to his beast, and wherever I go I see my horse fed.'

'It will be fed,' he said shortly. And then he waited for me to go into the house. 'The wife is in there,' he continued, looking at me stubbornly.

'*Imprimis* — if you understand Latin, my friend,' I answered; 'the horse in the stall.'

He saw that it was no good, turned the sorrel slowly round, and began to lead it across the village street. There was a shed behind the inn, which

I had already marked, and taken for the stable. I was surprised when I found that he was not going there, but I made no remark, and in a few minutes saw the horse made comfortable in a hovel which seemed to belong to a neighbour.

This done, the man led the way back to the inn, carrying my valise.

'You have no other guests?' I said, with a casual air. I knew that he was watching me closely.

'No,' he answered.

'This is not much in the way to anywhere, I suppose?'

'No.'

That was so evident, that I never saw a more retired place. The hanging woods, rising steeply to a great height, so shut the valley in that I was puzzled to think how a man could leave it save by the road I had come. The cottages, which were no more than mean, small huts, ran in a straggling double line, with many gaps—through fallen trees and ill-cleared meadows. Among them a noisy brook ran in and out.

And the inhabitants—charcoal-burners, or swine-herds, or poor devils of the like class, were no better than their dwellings. I looked in vain for the Château. It was not to be seen, and I dared not ask for it.

The man led me into the common room of the tavern—a low-roofed, poor place, lacking a chimney or glazed windows, and grimy with smoke and use. The fire—a great half-burned tree—smouldered on a stone hearth, raised a foot from the floor. A huge black pot simmered over it, and beside one window lounged a country fellow talking with the goodwife. In the dusk I could not see his face, but I gave the woman a word, and sat down to wait for my supper.

She seemed more silent than the common run of her kind; but this might be because her husband was present. While she moved about, getting my meal, he took his place against the door-post and fell to staring at me so persistently that I felt by no means at my ease. He was a tall, strong fellow, with a shaggy moustache and brown beard, cut in the mode Henri Quatre; and on

the subject of that king—a safe one, I knew, with a Béarnais—and on that alone, I found it possible to make him talk. Even then there was a suspicious gleam in his eyes that bade me abstain from questions; so that as the darkness deepened behind him, and the firelight played more and more strongly on his features, and I thought of the leagues of woodland that lay between this remote valley and Auch, I recalled the Cardinal's warning that if I failed in my attempt I should be little likely to trouble Paris again.

The lout by the window paid no attention to me; nor I to him, when I had once satisfied myself that he was really what he seemed to be. But by-and-by two or three men—rough, uncouth fellows—dropped in to reinforce the landlord, and they, too, seemed to have no other business than to sit in silence looking at me, or now and again to exchange a word in a *patois* of their own. By the time my supper was ready, the knaves numbered six in all; and, as they were armed to a man with huge Spanish knives, and made

it clear that they resented my presence in their dull rustic fashion—every rustic is suspicious—I began to think that, unwittingly, I had put my head into a wasps' nest.

Nevertheless, I ate and drank with apparent appetite; but little that passed within the circle of light cast by the smoky lamp escaped me. I watched the men's looks and gestures at least as sharply as they watched mine; and all the time I was racking my wits for some mode of disarming their suspicions, or failing that, of learning something more of the position, which far exceeded in difficulty and danger anything that I had expected. The whole valley, it would seem, was on the look-out to protect my man!

I had purposely brought with me from Auch a couple of bottles of choice Armagnac; and these had been carried into the house with my saddle bags. I took one out now and opened it and carelessly offered a dram of the spirit to the landlord. He took it. As he drank it, I saw his face flush; he handed back the cup re-

luctantly, and on that hint I offered him another. The strong spirit was already beginning to work, and he accepted, and in a few minutes began to talk more freely and with less of the constraint which had before marked us all. Still, his tongue ran chiefly on questions — he would know this, he would learn that; but even this was a welcome change. I told him openly whence I had come, by what road, how long I had stayed in Auch, and where; and so far I satisfied his curiosity. Only, when I came to the subject of my visit to Cocheforêt I kept a mysterious silence, hinting darkly at business in Spain and friends across the border, and this and that; in this way giving the peasants to understand, if they pleased, that I was in the same interest as their exiled master.

They took the bait, winked at one another and began to look at me in a more friendly way—the landlord foremost. But when I had led them so far, I dared go no farther, lest I should commit myself and be found out. I stopped, therefore, and, harking back to general

subjects, chanced to compare my province with theirs. The landlord, now become almost talkative, was not slow to take up this challenge; and it presently led to my acquiring a curious piece of knowledge. He was boasting of his great snow mountains, the forests that propped them, the bears that roamed in them, the izards that loved the ice, and the boars that fed on the oak mast.

'Well,' I said, quite by chance, 'we have not these things, it is true. But we have things in the north you have not. We have tens of thousands of good horses—not such ponies as you breed here. At the horse fair at Fécamp my sorrel would be lost in the crowd. Here in the south you will not meet his match in a long day's journey.'

'Do not make too sure of that,' the man replied, his eyes bright with triumph and the dram. 'What would you say if I showed you a better—in my own stable?'

I saw that his words sent a kind of thrill through his other hearers, and that such of them

as understood—for two or three of them talked their *patois* only—looked at him angrily; and in a twinkling I began to comprehend. But I affected dulness, and laughed in scorn.

'Seeing is believing,' I said. 'I doubt if you know a good horse when you see one, my friend.'

'Oh, don't I?' he said, winking. 'Indeed!'

'I doubt it,' I answered stubbornly.

'Then come with me, and I will show you one,' he retorted, discretion giving way to vainglory. His wife and the others, I saw, looked at him dumbfounded; but, without paying any heed to them, he rose, took up a lanthorn, and, assuming an air of peculiar wisdom, opened the door. 'Come with me,' he continued. 'I don't know a good horse when I see one, don't I? I know a better than yours, at anyrate!'

I should not have been surprised if the other men had interfered; but I suppose he was a leader among them, they did not, and in a moment we were outside. Three paces through the darkness took us to the stable, an offset at

the back of the inn. My man twirled the pin, and, leading the way in, raised his lanthorn. A horse whinnied softly, and turned its bright, mild eyes on us—a baldfaced chestnut, with white hairs in its tail and one white stocking.

'There!' my guide exclaimed, waving the lanthorn to and fro boastfully, that I might see its points. 'What do you say to that? Is that an undersized pony?'

'No,' I answered, purposely stinting my praise. 'It is pretty fair—for this country.'

'Or any country,' he answered wrathfully. 'Or any country, I say—I don't care where it is! And I have reason to know! Why, man, that horse is— But there, that is a good horse, if ever you saw one!' And with that he ended—abruptly and lamely; lowered the lanthorn with a sudden gesture, and turned to the door. He was on the instant in such hurry to leave that he almost shouldered me out.

But I understood. I knew that he had nearly betrayed all—that he had been on the point of blurting out that that was M. de Cocheforêt's

horse! M. Cocheforêt's *comprenez bien!* And while I turned away my face in the darkness, that he might not see me smile, I was not surprised to find the man in a moment changed, and become, in the closing of the door, as sober and suspicious as before, ashamed of himself and enraged with me, and in a mood to cut my throat for a trifle.

It was not my cue to quarrel, however. I made therefore, as if I had seen nothing, and when we were back in the inn praised the horse grudgingly, and like a man but half convinced. The ugly looks and ugly weapons I saw round me were fine incentives to caution; and no Italian, I flatter myself, could have played his part more nicely than I did. But I was heartily glad when it was over, and I found myself, at last, left alone for the night in a little garret—a mere fowl-house — upstairs, formed by the roof and gable walls, and hung with strings of apples and chestnuts. It was a poor sleeping-place—rough, chilly, and unclean. I ascended to it by a ladder; my cloak and a little fern

formed my only bed. But I was glad to accept it, for it enabled me to be alone and to think out the position unwatched.

Of course M. de Cocheforêt was at the Château. He had left his horse here, and gone up on foot; probably that was his usual plan. He was therefore within my reach, in one sense —I could not have come at a better time— but in another he was as much beyond it as if I were still in Paris. For so far was I from being able to seize him that I dared not ask a question, or let fall a rash word, or even look about me freely. I saw I dared not. The slightest hint of my mission, the faintest breath of distrust, would lead to throat-cutting —and the throat would be mine; while the longer I lay in the village, the greater suspicion I should incur, and the closer would be the watch kept upon me.

In such a position some men might have given up the attempt in despair, and saved themselves across the border. But I have always valued myself on my fidelity, and I did not

shrink. If not to-day, to-morrow; if not this time, next time. The dice do not always turn up aces. Bracing myself, therefore, to the occasion, I crept, as soon as the house was quiet, to the window, a small, square, open lattice, much cobwebbed, and partly stuffed with hay. I looked out. The village seemed to be asleep. The dark branches of trees hung a few feet away, and almost obscured a grey, cloudy sky, through which a wet moon sailed drearily. Looking downwards, I could at first see nothing; but as my eyes grew used to the darkness — I had only just put out my rushlight — I made out the stable door and the shadowy outlines of the lean-to roof.

I had hoped for this, for I could now keep watch, and learn at least whether Cocheforêt left before morning. If he did not, I should know he was still here. If he did, I should be the better for seeing his features, and learning, perhaps, other things that might be of use to me in the future.

Making up my mind to the uncomfortable,

I sat down on the floor by the lattice, and began a vigil that might last, I knew, until morning. It did last about an hour, at the end of which time I heard whispering below, then footsteps; then, as some persons turned a corner, a voice speaking aloud and carelessly. I could not catch the words or meaning, but the voice was a gentleman's, and its bold accents and masterful tone left me in no doubt that the speaker was M. de Cocheforêt himself. Hoping to learn more, I pressed my face nearer to the opening, and had just made out through the gloom two figures—one that of a tall, slight man, wearing a cloak, the other, I fancied, a woman's, in a sheeny white dress—when a thundering rap on the door of my garret made me spring back a yard from the lattice, and lie down hurriedly on my couch. The summons was repeated.

'Well?' I cried, rising on my elbow, and cursing the untimely interruption. I was burning with anxiety to see more. 'What is it? What is the matter?'

The trap-door was lifted a foot or more. The landlord thrust up his head.

'You called, did you not?' he said.

He held up a rushlight, which illumined half the room and lit up his grinning face.

'Called—at this hour of the night, you fool?' I answered angrily. 'No! I did not call. Go to bed, man!'

But he remained on the ladder, gaping stupidly. 'I heard you,' he said.

'Go to bed! You are drunk,' I answered, sitting up. 'I tell you I did not call.'

'Oh, very well,' he answered slowly. 'And you do not want anything?'

'Nothing—except to be left alone,' I replied sourly.

'Umph!' he said. 'Good-night!'

'Good-night! Good-night!' I answered with what patience I might. The tramp of the horse's hoofs as it was led out of the stable was in my ears at the moment. 'Good-night!' I continued feverishly, hoping that he would still

retire in time, and I have a chance to look out. 'I want to sleep.'

'Good,' he said, with a broad grin. 'But it is early yet, and you have plenty of time.'

And then, at last, he slowly let down the trap-door, and I heard him chuckle as he went down the ladder.

Before he reached the bottom I was at the window. The woman, whom I had seen, still stood below in the same place, and beside her was a man in a peasant's dress, holding a lanthorn. But the man, the man I wanted to see, was no longer there. He was gone, and it was evident that the others no longer feared me; for while I gazed the landlord came out to them with another lanthorn swinging in his hand, and said something to the lady, and she looked up at my window and laughed.

It was a warm night, and she wore nothing over her white dress. I could see her tall, shapely figure and shining eyes, and the firm contour of her beautiful face, which, if any fault might be found with it, erred in being too regular. She

looked like a woman formed by nature to meet dangers and difficulties, and to play a great part; even here, at midnight, in the midst of these desperate men, she did not seem out of place. I could fancy — I did not find it impossible to fancy—that under her queenly exterior, and behind the contemptuous laugh with which she heard the landlord's story, there lurked a woman's soul, a soul capable of folly and tenderness. But no outward sign betrayed its presence—as I saw her then.

I scanned her very carefully; and secretly, if the truth be told, I was glad to find that Madame de Cocheforêt was such a woman. I was glad that she had laughed as she had—with a ring of disdain and defiance; glad that she was not a little, tender, child-like woman, to be crushed by the first pinch of trouble. For if I succeeded in my task, if I contrived to—but, pish! Women, I told myself, were all alike. She would find consolation quickly enough.

I watched until the group broke up, and Madame, with one of the men, went her way

round the corner of the inn, and out of my sight. Then I retired to bed again, feeling more than ever perplexed what course I should adopt. It was clear that to succeed I must obtain admission to the house, which was garrisoned, according to my instructions, by two or three old men-servants only, and as many women; since Madame, to disguise her husband's visits the more easily, lived, and gave out that she lived, in great retirement. To seize her husband at home, therefore, might be no impossible task; though here, in the heart of the village, a troop of horse might make the attempt, and fail.

But how was I to gain admission to the house —a house guarded by quick-witted women, and fenced with all the precautions love could devise? That was the question; and dawn found me still debating it, still as far as ever from an answer. Anxious and feverish, I was glad when the light came, and I could get up. I thought that the fresh air might inspire me, and I was tired of my stuffy closet. I crept stealthily down the ladder, and managed to pass unseen

through the lower room, in which several persons were snoring heavily. The outer door was not fastened, and in a hand-turn I was in the street.

It was still so early that the trees stood up black against the reddening sky, but the bough upon the post before the door was growing green, and in a few minutes the grey light would be everywhere. Already, even in the roadway, there was a glimmering of it; and as I stood at the corner of the house—where I could command both the front and the side on which the stable opened—sniffing the fresh air, and looking for any trace of the midnight departure, my eyes detected something light-coloured lying on the ground. It was not more than two or three paces from me, and I stepped to it and picked it up curiously, hoping that it might be a note. It was not a note, however, but a tiny orange-coloured sachet such as women carry in the bosom. It was full of some faintly-scented powder, and bore on one side the initial 'E,' worked in white silk; and was altogether a dainty little toy, such as women love.

Doubtless Madame de Cocheforêt had dropped it in the night. I turned it over and over; and then I put it in my pouch with a smile, thinking that it might be useful sometime, and in some way. I had scarcely done this, and turned with the intention of exploring the street, when the door behind me creaked on its leather hinges, and in a moment the host stood at my elbow, and gave me a surly greeting.

Evidently his suspicions were again aroused, for from this time he managed to be with me, on one pretence or another, until noon. Moreover, his manner grew each moment more churlish, his hints plainer; until I could scarcely, avoid noticing the one or the other. About mid-day, having followed me for the twentieth time into the street, he came to the point by asking me rudely if I did not need my horse.

'No,' I said. 'Why do you ask?'

'Because,' he answered, with an ugly smile, 'this is not a very healthy place for strangers.'

'Ah!' I retorted. 'But the border air suits me, you see.'

It was a lucky answer, for, taken with my talk the night before, it puzzled him, by suggesting that I was on the losing side, and had my reasons for lying near Spain. Before he had done scratching his head over it, the clatter of hoofs broke the sleepy quiet of the village street, and the lady I had seen the night before rode quickly round the corner, and drew her horse on to its haunches. Without looking at me, she called to the innkeeper to come to her stirrup.

He went. The moment his back was turned, I slipped away, and in a twinkling was hidden by a house. Two or three glum-looking fellows stared at me as I passed down the street, but no one moved; and in two minutes I was clear of the village, and in a half-worn track which ran through the wood, and led — if my ideas were right — to the Château. To discover the house and learn all that was to be learned about its situation were my most pressing needs; and these, even at the risk of a knife thrust, I was determined to satisfy.

I had not gone two hundred paces along the

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path, however, before I heard the tread of a horse behind me, and I had just time to hide myself before Madame came up and rode by me, sitting her horse gracefully, and with all the courage of a northern woman. I watched her pass, and then, assured by her presence that I was in the right road, I hurried after her. Two minutes' walking at speed brought me to a light wooden bridge spanning a stream. I crossed this, and, as the wood opened, saw before me first a wide, pleasant meadow, and beyond this a terrace. On the terrace, pressed upon on three sides by thick woods, stood a grey mansion, with the corner tourelles, steep, high roofs, and round balconies, that men loved and built in the days of the first Francis.

It was of good size, but wore a gloomy aspect. A great yew hedge, which seemed to enclose a walk or bowling-green, hid the ground floor of the east wing from view, while a formal rose garden, stiff even in neglect, lay in front of the main building. The west wing, of which the lower roofs fell gradually away

to the woods, probably contained the stables and granaries.

I stood a moment only, but I marked all, and noted how the road reached the house, and which windows were open to attack; then I turned and hastened back. Fortunately, I met no one between the house and the village, and was able to enter my host's with an air of the most complete innocence.

Short as had been my absence, however, I found things altered there. Round the door lounged three strangers—stout, well-armed fellows, whose bearing, as they loitered and chattered, suggested a curious mixture of smugness and independence. Half a dozen pack-horses stood tethered to the post in front of the house; and the landlord's manner, from being rude and churlish only, had grown perplexed and almost timid. One of the strangers, I soon found, supplied him with wine; the others were travelling merchants, who rode in the first one's company for the sake of safety. All were substantial men from Tarbes—solid burgesses; and

I was not long in guessing that my host, fearing what might leak out before them, and, particularly, that I might refer to the previous night's disturbance, was on tenter-hooks while they remained.

For a time this did not suggest anything to me. But when we had all taken our seats for supper, there came an addition to the party. The door opened, and the fellow whom I had seen the night before with Madame de Coche-forêt, entered and took a stool by the fire. I felt sure that he was one of the servants at the Château; and in a flash his presence inspired me with the most feasible plan for obtaining admission which I had yet hit upon. I felt myself grow hot at the thought—it seemed so full of promise, yet so doubtful—and, on the instant, without giving myself time to think too much, I began to carry it into effect.

I called for two or three bottles of better wine, and, assuming a jovial air, passed it round the table. When we had drunk a few glasses I fell to talking, and, choosing politics, took

the side of the Languedoc party and the malcontents in so reckless a fashion that the innkeeper was beside himself at my imprudence. The merchants, who belonged to the class with whom the Cardinal was always most popular, looked first astonished and then enraged. But I was not to be checked; hints and sour looks were lost upon me. I grew more outspoken with every glass, I drank to the Rochellois, I swore it would not be long before they raised their heads again; and, at last, while the innkeeper and his wife were engaged lighting the lamp, I passed round the bottle and called on all for a toast.

'I'll give you one to begin,' I bragged noisily. 'A gentleman's toast! A southern toast! Here is confusion to the Cardinal, and a health to all who hate him!'

'*Mon dieu!*' one of the strangers cried, springing from his seat in a rage. 'I am not going to stomach that! Is your house a common treason-hole,' he continued, turning furiously on the landlord, 'that you suffer this?'

'Hoity-toity!' I answered, coolly keeping my seat. 'What is all this? Don't you relish my toast, little man?'

'No—nor you!' he retorted hotly; 'whoever you may be!'

'Then I will give you another,' I answered, with a hiccough. 'Perhaps it will be more to your taste. Here is the Duke of Orléans, and may he soon be King!'

CHAPTER III

THE HOUSE IN THE WOOD

WORDS so reckless fairly shook the three men out of their anger. For a moment they glared at me as if they had seen a ghost. Then the wine merchant clapped his hand on the table.

'That is enough,' he said, with a look at his companions. 'I think that there can be no mistake about that. As damnable treason as ever I heard whispered! I congratulate you, sir, on your boldness. As for you,' he continued, turning with an ugly sneer to the landlord, 'I shall know now the company you keep! I was

not aware that my wine wet whistles to such a tune!'

But if he was startled, the innkeeper was furious, seeing his character thus taken away; and, being at no time a man of many words, he vented his rage exactly in the way I wished, raising in a twinkling such an uproar as can scarcely be conceived. With a roar like a bull's, he ran headlong at the table, and overturned it on the top of me. Fortunately the woman saved the lamp, and fled with it into a corner, whence she and the man from the Château watched the skirmish in silence; but the pewter cups and platters flew spinning across the floor, while the table pinned me to the ground among the ruins of my stool. Having me at this disadvantage—for at first I made no resistance—the landlord began to belabour me with the first thing he snatched up, and when I tried to defend myself, cursed me with each blow for a treacherous rogue and a vagrant. Meanwhile the three merchants, delighted with the turn things had taken, skipped round us laughing, and now hounded him on,

now bantered me with 'How is that for the Duke of Orléans?' and 'How now, traitor?'

When I thought that this had lasted long enough — or, to speak more plainly, when I could stand the innkeeper's drubbing no longer —I threw him off, and struggled to my feet; but still, though the blood was trickling down my face, I refrained from drawing my sword. I caught up instead a leg of the stool which lay handy, and, watching my opportunity, dealt the landlord a shrewd blow under the ear, which laid him out in a moment on the wreck of his own table.

'Now,' I cried, brandishing my new weapon, which fitted the hand to a nicety, 'come on! Come on! if you dare to strike a blow, you peddling, truckling, huckstering knaves! A fig for you and your shaveling Cardinal!'

The red-faced wine merchant drew his sword in a one-two.

'Why, you drunken fool,' he said wrathfully, 'put that stick down, or I will spit you like a lark!'

'Lark in your teeth!' I cried, staggering as if

the wine were in my head. 'And cuckoo, too! Another word, and I—'

He made a couple of savage passes at me, but in a twinkling his sword flew across the room.

'*Voilà!*' I shouted, lurching forward, as if I had luck and not skill to thank for my victory. 'Now, the next! Come on, come on—you white-livered knaves!' And, pretending a drunken frenzy, I flung my weapon bodily amongst them, and seizing the nearest, began to wrestle with him.

In a moment they all threw themselves upon me, and, swearing copiously, bore me back to the door. The wine merchant cried breathlessly to the woman to open it, and in a twinkling they had me through it, and half-way across the road. The one thing I feared was a knife-thrust in the *mêlée;* but I had to run that risk, and the men were honest, and, thinking me drunk, indulgent. In a trice I found myself on my back in the dirt, with my head humming; and heard the bars of the door fall noisily into their places.

I got up and went to the door, and, to play out my part, hammered on it frantically; crying out

to them to let me in. But the three travellers only jeered at me, and the landlord, coming to the window, with his head bleeding, shook his fist at me, and cursed me for a mischief-maker.

Baffled in this, I retired to a log which lay in the road a few paces from the house, and sat down on it to await events. With torn clothes and bleeding face, hatless and covered with dirt, I was in little better case than my opponent. It was raining, too, and the dripping branches swayed over my head. The wind was in the south—the coldest quarter. I began to feel chilled and dispirited. If my scheme failed, I had forfeited roof and bed to no purpose, and placed future progress out of the question. It was a critical moment.

But at last that happened for which I had been looking. The door swung open a few inches, and a man came noiselessly out; it was quickly barred behind him. He stood a moment, waiting on the threshold and peering into the gloom; and seemed to expect to be attacked. Finding himself unmolested, however, and all quiet, he

went off steadily down the street—towards the Château.

I let a couple of minutes go by, and then I followed. I had no difficulty in hitting on the track at the end of the street, but when I had once plunged into the wood, I found myself in darkness so intense that I soon strayed from the path, and fell over roots, and tore my clothes with thorns, and lost my temper twenty times before I found the path again. However, I gained the bridge at last, and thence caught sight of a light twinkling before me. To make for it across the meadow and terrace was an easy task; yet, when I had reached the door and had hammered upon it, I was so worn out, and in so sorry a plight that I sank down, and had little need to play a part, or pretend to be worse than I was.

For a long time no one answered. The dark house towering above me remained silent. I could hear, mingled with the throbbings of my heart, the steady croaking of the frogs in a pond near the stables; but no other sound. In

a frenzy of impatience and disgust, I stood up again and hammered, kicking with my heels on the nail-studded door, and crying out desperately,—

'*A moi! A moi!*'

Then, or a moment later, I heard a remote door opened; footsteps as of more than one person drew near. I raised my voice and cried again,—

'*A moi!*'

'Who is there?' a voice asked.

'A gentleman in distress,' I answered piteously, moving my hands across the door. 'For God's sake open and let me in. I am hurt, and dying of cold.'

'What brings you here?' the voice asked sharply. Despite its tartness, I fancied that it was a woman's.

'Heaven knows!' I answered desperately. 'I cannot tell. They maltreated me at the inn, and threw me into the street. I crawled away, and have been wandering in the wood for hours. Then I saw a light here.'

On that some muttering took place on the other side of the door—to which I had my ear. It ended in the bars being lowered. The door swung partly open, and a light shone out, dazzling me. I tried to shade my eyes with my fingers, and, as I did so, fancied I heard a murmur of pity. But when I looked in under screen of my hand, I saw only one person—the man who held the light, and his aspect was so strange, so terrifying, that, shaken as I was by fatigue, I recoiled a step.

He was a tall and very thin man, meanly dressed in a short, scanty jacket and well-darned hose. Unable, for some reason, to bend his neck, he carried his head with a strange stiffness.

And that head—never did living man show a face so like death. His forehead was bald and yellow, his cheek-bones stood out under the strained skin, all the lower part of his face fell in, his jaws receded, his cheeks were hollow, his lips and chin were thin and fleshless. He seemed to have only one expression—a fixed grin.

While I stood looking at this formidable creature, he made a quick movement to shut the door again, smiling more widely. I had the presence of mind to thrust in my foot, and, before he could resent the act, a voice in the background cried,—

'For shame, Clon! Stand back, stand back! do you hear? I am afraid, Monsieur, that you are hurt.'

Those words were my welcome to that house; and, spoken at an hour and in circumstances so gloomy, they made a lasting impression. Round the hall ran a gallery, and this, the height of the apartment, and the dark panelling seemed to swallow up the light. I stood within the entrance (as it seemed to me) of a huge cave; the skull-headed porter had the air of an ogre. Only the voice which greeted me dispelled the illusion. I turned trembling towards the quarter whence it came, and, shading my eyes, made out a woman's form standing in a doorway under the gallery. A second figure, which I took to be that of the servant I had seen at the inn, loomed uncertainly beside her.

I bowed in silence. My teeth were chattering. I was faint without feigning, and felt a kind of terror, hard to explain, at the sound of this woman's voice.

'One of our people has told me about you,' she continued, speaking out of the darkness. 'I am sorry that this has happened to you here, but I am afraid that you were indiscreet.'

'I take all the blame, Madame,' I answered humbly. 'I ask only shelter for the night.'

'The time has not yet come when we cannot give our friends that!' she answered with noble courtesy. 'When it does, Monsieur, we shall be homeless ourselves.'

I shivered, looking anywhere but at her; for, if the truth be told, I had not sufficiently pictured this scene of my arrival—I had not foredrawn its details; and now I took part in it I felt a miserable meanness weigh me down. I had never from the first liked the work, but I had had no choice, and I had no choice now. Luckily, the guise in which I came, my fatigue, and wound were a sufficient mask, or I should

have incurred suspicion at once. For I am sure that if ever in this world a brave man wore a hang-dog air, or Gil de Berault fell below himself, it was then and there — on Madame de Cocheforêt's threshold, with her welcome sounding in my ears.

One, I think, did suspect me. Clon, the porter, continued to hold the door obstinately ajar and to eye me with grinning spite, until his mistress, with some sharpness, bade him drop the bars and conduct me to a room.

'Do you go also, Louis,' she continued, speaking to the man beside her, 'and see this gentleman comfortably disposed. I am sorry,' she added, addressing me in the graceful tone she had before used, and I thought that I could see her head bend in the darkness, 'that our present circumstances do not permit us to welcome you more fitly, Monsieur. But the troubles of the times—however, you will excuse what is lacking. Until to-morrow, I have the honour to bid you good-night.

'Good-night, Madame,' I stammered, trembling.

I had not been able to distinguish her face in the gloom of the doorway, but her voice, her greeting, her presence unmanned me. I was troubled and perplexed; I had not spirit to kick a dog. I followed the two servants from the hall without heeding how we went; nor was it until we came to a full stop at a door in a white-washed corridor, and it was forced upon me that something was in question between my two conductors that I began to take notice.

Then I saw that one of them, Louis, wished to lodge me here where we stood. The porter, on the other hand, who held the keys, would not. He did not speak a word, nor did the other—and this gave a queer ominous character to the debate; but he continued to jerk his head towards the farther end of the corridor; and, at last, he carried his point. Louis shrugged his shoulders, and moved on, glancing askance at me; and I, not understanding the matter in debate, followed the pair in silence.

We reached the end of the corridor, and there for an instant the monster with the keys paused

and grinned at me. Then he turned into a narrow passage on the left, and after following it for some paces, halted before a small, strong door. His key jarred in the lock, but he forced it shrieking round, and with a savage flourish threw the door open.

I walked in and saw a mean, bare chamber with barred windows. The floor was indifferently clean, there was no furniture. The yellow light of the lanthorn falling on the stained walls gave the place the look of a dungeon. I turned to the two men. 'This is not a very good room,' I said. 'And it feels damp. Have you no other?'

Louis looked doubtfully at his companion. But the porter shook his head stubbornly.

'Why does he not speak?' I asked with impatience.

'He is dumb,' Louis answered.

'Dumb!' I exclaimed. 'But he hears.'

'He has ears,' the servant answered drily. 'But he has no tongue, Monsieur.'

I shuddered. 'How did he lose it?' I asked.

'At Rochelle. He was a spy, and the king's people took him the day the town surrendered. They spared his life, but cut out his tongue.'

'Ah!' I said. I wished to say more, to be natural, to show myself at my ease. But the porter's eyes seemed to burn into me, and my own tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. He opened his lips and pointed to his throat with a horrid gesture, and I shook my head and turned from him—'You can let me have some bedding?' I murmured hastily, for the sake of saying something, and to escape.

'Of course, Monsieur,' Louis answered. 'I will fetch some.'

He went away, thinking doubtless that Clon would stay with me. But after waiting a minute the porter strode off also with the lanthorn, leaving me to stand in the middle of the damp, dark room and reflect on the position. It was plain that Clon suspected me. This prison-like room, with its barred window, at the back of the house, and in the wing farthest from the stables, proved so much. Clearly, he was a dangerous fellow,

of whom I must beware. I had just begun to wonder how Madame could keep such a monster in her house, when I heard his step returning. He came in, lighting Louis, who carried a small pallet and a bundle of coverings.

The dumb man had, besides the lanthorn, a bowl of water and a piece of rag in his hand. He set them down, and going out again, fetched in a stool. Then he hung up the lanthorn on a nail, took the bowl and rag, and invited me to sit down.

I was loth to let him touch me; but he continued to stand over me, pointing and grinning with dark persistence, and rather than stand on a trifle I sat down at last and gave him his way. He bathed my head carefully enough, and I dare say did it good; but I understood. I knew that his only desire was to learn whether the cut was real or a pretence, and I began to fear him more and more; until he was gone from the room, I dared scarcely lift my face lest he should read too much in it.

Alone, even, I felt uncomfortable, this seemed

so sinister a business, and so ill begun. I was in the house. But Madame's frank voice haunted me, and the dumb man's eyes, full of suspicion and menace. When I presently got up and tried my door, I found it locked. The room smelt dank and close—like a vault. I could not see through the barred window, but I could hear the boughs sweep it in ghostly fashion; and I guessed that it looked out where the wood grew close to the walls of the house, and that even in the day the sun never peeped through it.

Nevertheless, tired and worn out, I slept at last. When I awoke the room was full of grey light, the door stood open, and Louis, looking ashamed of himself, waited by my pallet with a cup of wine in his hand, and some bread and fruit on a platter.

'Will Monsieur be good enough to rise?' he said. 'It is eight o'clock.'

'Willingly,' I answered tartly. 'Now that the door is unlocked.'

He turned red. 'It was an oversight,' he stammered. 'Clon is accustomed to lock the

door, and he did it inadvertently, forgetting that there was anyone—'

'Inside,' I said drily.

'Precisely, Monsieur,'

'Ah!' I replied. 'Well, I do not think the oversight would please Madame de Cocheforêt if she heard of it?'

'If Monsieur would have the kindness not to—'

'Mention it, my good fellow?' I answered, looking at him with meaning as I rose. 'No. But it must not occur again.'

I saw that this man was not like Clon. He had the instincts of the family servant, and freed from the influences of fear and darkness felt ashamed of his conduct, While he arranged my clothes, he looked round the room with an air of distaste, and muttered once or twice that the furniture of the principal chambers was packed away.

'M. de Cocheforêt is abroad, I think?' I said as I dressed.

'And likely to remain there,' the man an-

swered carelessly, shrugging his shoulders. 'Monsieur will doubtless have heard that he is in trouble. In the meantime, the house is *triste*, and Monsieur must overlook much, if he stays. Madame lives retired, and the roads are ill-made and visitors few.'

'When the lion was ill the jackals left him,' I said.

Louis nodded. 'It is true,' he answered simply. He made no boast or brag on his own account, I noticed; and it came home to me that he was a faithful fellow, such as I love. I questioned him discreetly, and learned that he and Clon and an older man who lived over the stables were the only male servants left of a great household. Madame, her sister-in-law, and three women completed the family.

It took me some time to repair my wardrobe, so that I daresay it was nearly ten when I left my dismal little room. I found Louis waiting in the corridor, and he told me that Madame de Cocheforêt and Mademoiselle were in the rose garden, and would be pleased to

receive me. I nodded, and he guided me through several dim passages to a parlour with an open door, through which the sun shone gaily on the floor. Cheered by the morning air and this sudden change to pleasantness and life, I stepped lightly out.

The two ladies were walking up and down a wide path which bisected the garden. The weeds grew rankly in the gravel underfoot, the rose bushes which bordered the walk thrust their branches here and there in untrained freedom, a dark yew hedge which formed the background bristled with rough shoots and sadly needed trimming. But I did not see any of these things. The grace, the noble air, the distinction of the two women who paced slowly to meet me—and who shared all these qualities, greatly as they differed in others—left me no power to notice trifles.

Mademoiselle was a head shorter than her *belle sœur*—a slender woman and petite, with a beautiful face and a fair complexion; a woman wholly womanly. She walked with dignity, but beside

Madame's stately figure she had an air almost childish. And it was characteristic of the two that Mademoiselle as they drew near to me regarded me with sorrowful attention, Madame with a grave smile.

I bowed low. They returned the salute. 'This is my sister,' Madame de Cocheforêt said, with a very slight air of condescension. 'Will you please to tell me your name, Monsieur?'

'I am M. de Barthe, a gentleman of Normandy,' I said, taking on impulse the name of my mother. My own, by a possibility, might be known.

Madame's face wore a puzzled look. 'I do not know that name, I think,' she said thoughtfully. Doubtless she was going over in her mind all the names with which conspiracy had made her familiar.

'That is my misfortune, Madame,' I said humbly.

'Nevertheless I am going to scold you,' she rejoined, still eyeing me with some keenness. 'I am glad to see that you are none the worse for your adventure—but others may be. And you should have borne that in mind, sir.'

"I AM M. DE BARTHE, A GENTLEMAN OF NORMANDY," I SAID.

'I do not think that I hurt the man seriously,' I stammered.

'I do not refer to that,' she answered coldly. You know, or should know, that we are in disgrace here; that the Government regards us already with an evil eye, and that a very small thing would lead them to garrison the village, and perhaps oust us from the little the wars have left us. You should have known this, and considered it,' she continued. 'Whereas—I do not say that you are a braggart, M. de Barthe. But on this one occasion you seem to have played the part of one.'

'Madame, I did not think,' I stammered.

'Want of thought causes much evil,' she answered, smiling. 'However, I have spoken, and we trust that while you stay with us you will be more careful. For the rest, Monsieur,' she continued graciously, raising her hand to prevent me speaking, 'we do not know why you are here, or what plans you are pursuing. And we do not wish to know. It is enough that you are of our side. This house is at your service as long as you please

to use it. And if we can aid you in any other way we will do so.'

'Madame!' I exclaimed; and there I stopped. I could say no more. The rose-garden, with its air of neglect, the shadow of the quiet house that fell across it, the great yew hedge which backed it, and was the pattern of one under which I had played in childhood—all had points that pricked me. But the women's kindness, their unquestioning confidence, the noble air of hospitality which moved them! Against these and their placid beauty in its peaceful frame I had no shield, no defence. I turned away, and feigned to be overcome by gratitude.

'I have no words—to thank you!' I muttered presently. 'I am a little shaken this morning. I —pardon me.'

'We will leave you for a while,' Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt said in gentle pitying tones. 'The air will revive you. Louis shall call you when we go to dinner, M. de Barthe. Come, Elise.'

I bowed low to hide my face, and they nodded pleasantly—not looking closely at me—as they

walked by me to the house. I watched the two gracious, pale-robed figures until the doorway swallowed them, and then I walked away to a quiet corner where the shrubs grew highest and the yew hedge threw its deepest shadow, and I stood to think.

And, *mon Dieu*, strange thoughts. If the oak can think at the moment the wind uproots it, or the gnarled thorn-bush when the landslip tears it from the slope, they may have such thoughts. I stared at the leaves, at the rotting blossoms, into the dark cavities of the hedge; I stared mechanically, dazed and wondering. What was the purpose for which I was here? What was the work I had come to do? Above all, how—my God! how was I to do it in the face of these helpless women, who trusted me, who believed in me, who opened their house to me? Clon had not frightened me, nor the loneliness of the leagued village, nor the remoteness of this corner where the dread Cardinal seemed a name, and the King's writ ran slowly, and the rebellion,

long quenched elsewhere, still smouldered. But Madame's pure faith, the younger woman's tenderness—how was I to face these?

I cursed the Cardinal—would he had stayed at Luchon. I cursed the English fool who had brought me to this, I cursed the years of plenty and scarceness, and the Quartier Marais, and Zaton's, where I had lived like a pig, and—

A touch fell on my arm. I turned. It was Clon. How he had stolen up so quietly, how long he had been at my elbow, I could not tell. But his eyes gleamed spitefully in their deep sockets, and he laughed with his fleshless lips; and I hated him. In the daylight the man looked more like a death's-head than ever. I fancied that I read in his face that he knew my secret, and I flashed into rage at sight of him.

'What is it?' I cried, with another oath. 'Don't lay your corpse-claws on me!'

He mowed at me, and, bowing with ironical politeness, pointed to the house.

'Is Madame served?' I said impatiently,

crushing down my anger. 'Is that what you mean, fool?'

He nodded.

'Very well,' I retorted. 'I can find my way then. You may go!'

He fell behind, and I strode back through the sunshine and flowers, and along the grass-grown paths, to the door by which I had come. I walked fast, but his shadow kept pace with me, driving out the unaccustomed thoughts in which I had been indulging. Slowly but surely it darkened my mood. After all, this was a little, little place; the people who lived here—I shrugged my shoulders. France, power, pleasure, life, everything worth winning, worth having, lay yonder in the great city. A boy might wreck himself here for a fancy; a man of the world, never. When I entered the room, where the two ladies stood waiting for me by the table, I was nearly my old self again. And a chance word presently completed the work.

'Clon made you understand, then?' the younger woman said kindly, as I took my seat.

'Yes, Mademoiselle,' I answered. On that I saw the two smile at one another, and I added: 'He is a strange creature. I wonder that you can bear to have him near you.'

'Poor man! You do not know his story?' Madame said.

'I have heard something of it,' I answered. 'Louis told me.'

'Well, I do shudder at him sometimes,' she replied, in a low voice. 'He has suffered —and horribly, and for us. But I wish that it had been on any other service. Spies are necessary things, but one does not wish to have to do with them! Anything in the nature of treachery is so horrible.'

'Quick, Louis!' Mademoiselle exclaimed, 'the cognac, if you have any there! I am sure that you are—still feeling ill, Monsieur.'

'No, I thank you,' I muttered hoarsely, making an effort to recover myself. 'I am quite well. It was—an old wound that sometimes touches me.'

CHAPTER IV

MADAME AND MADEMOISELLE

TO be frank, however, it was not the old wound that touched me so nearly, but Madame's words; which, finishing what Clon's sudden appearance in the garden had begun, went a long way towards hardening me and throwing me back into myself. I saw with bitterness — what I had perhaps forgotten for a moment — how great was the chasm that separated me from these women; how impossible it was that we could long think alike; how far apart in views, in experience, in aims we were. And while I made a mock in my heart of their high-flown sentiments — or thought I did — I laughed no less at the folly which had led me to dream, even for a moment, that I could, at

my age, go back—go back and risk all for a whim, a scruple, the fancy of a lonely hour.

I daresay something of this showed in my face; for Madame's eyes mirrored a dim reflection of trouble as she looked at me, and Mademoiselle talked nervously and at random. At any rate, I fancied so, and I hastened to compose myself; and the two, in pressing upon me the simple dainties of the table soon forgot, or appeared to forget, the incident.

Yet in spite of this *contretemps*, that first meal had a strange charm for me. The round table whereat we dined was spread inside the open door which led to the garden, so that the October sunshine fell full on the spotless linen and quaint old plate, and the fresh balmy air filled the room with the sent of sweet herbs. Louis served us with the mien of a major-domo, and set on each dish as though it had been a peacock or a mess of ortolans. The woods provided the larger portion of our meal; the garden did its part; the confections Mademoiselle had cooked with her own hand.

By-and-by, as the meal went on, as Louis trod to and fro across the polished floor, and the last insects of summer hummed sleepily outside, and the two gracious faces continued to smile at me out of the gloom—for the ladies sat with their backs to the door—I began to dream again. I began to sink again into folly, that was half-pleasure, half-pain. The fury of the gaming-house and the riot of Zaton's seemed far away. The triumphs of the fencing-room—even they grew cheap and tawdry. I thought of existence as one outside it. I balanced this against that, and wondered whether, after all, the red soutane were so much better than the homely jerkin, or the fame of a day than ease and safety.

And life at Cocheforêt was all after the pattern of this dinner. Each day, I might almost say each meal, gave rise to the same sequence of thoughts. In Clon's presence, or when some word of Madame's, unconsciously harsh, reminded me of the distance between us, I was myself. At other times, in face of this peaceful and inti-

mate life, which was only rendered possible by the remoteness of the place and the peculiar circumstances in which the ladies stood, I felt a strange weakness. The loneliness of the woods that encircled the house, and only here and there afforded a distant glimpse of snow-clad peaks; the absence of any link to blind me to the old life, so that at intervals it seemed unreal; the remoteness of the great world, all tended to sap my will and weaken the purpose which had brought me to this place.

On the fourth day after my coming, however, something happened to break the spell. It chanced that I came late to dinner, and entered the room hastily and without ceremony, expecting to find Madame and her sister already seated. Instead, I found them talking in a low tone by the open door, with every mark of disorder in their appearance; while Clon and Louis stood at a little distance with downcast faces and perplexed looks.

I had time to see all this, and then my entrance wrought a sudden change. Clon and Louis sprang

to attention ; Madame and her sister came to the table and sat down ; and all made a shallow pretence of being at their ease. But Mademoiselle's face was pale, her hand trembled ; and though Madame's greater self-command enabled her to carry off the matter better, I saw that she was not herself. Once or twice she spoke harshly to Louis ; she fell at other times into a brown study ; and when she thought that I was not watching her, her face wore a look of deep anxiety.

I wondered what all this meant ; and I wondered more when, after the meal, the two walked in the garden for an hour with Clon. Mademoiselle came from this interview alone, and I was sure that she had been weeping. Madame and the dark porter stayed outside some time longer ; then she, too, came in, and disappeared.

Clon did not return with her, and when I went into the garden five minutes later, Louis also had vanished. Save for two women who sat sewing at an upper window, the house seemed to be deserted. Not a sound broke the afternoon stillness of room or garden, and yet I felt that

more was happening in this silence than appeared on the surface. I began to grow curious—suspicious; and presently slipped out myself by way of the stables, and skirting the wood at the back of the house, gained with a little trouble the bridge which crossed the stream and led to the village.

Turning round at this point I could see the house, and I moved a little aside into the underwood, and stood gazing at the windows, trying to unriddle the matter. It was not likely that M. de Cocheforêt would repeat his visit so soon; and, besides, the women's emotions had been those of pure dismay and grief, unmixed with any of the satisfaction to which such a meeting, though snatched by stealth, must give rise. I discarded my first thought therefore—that he had returned unexpectedly—and I sought for another solution.

But no other was on the instant forthcoming. The windows remained obstinately blind, no figures appeared on the terrace, the garden lay deserted, and without life. My departure had

not, as I half expected it would, drawn the secret into light.

I watched awhile, at times cursing my own meanness; but the excitement of the moment and the quest tided me over that. Then I determined to go down into the village and see whether anything was moving there. I had been down to the inn once, and had been received half sulkily, half courteously, as a person privileged at the great house, and therefore to be accepted. It would not be thought odd if I went again, and after a moment's thought, I started down the track.

This, where it ran through the wood, was so densely shaded that the sun penetrated to it little, and in patches only. A squirrel stirred at times, sliding round a trunk, or scampering across the dry leaves. Occasionally a pig grunted and moved farther into the wood. But the place was very quiet, and I do not know how it was that I surprised Clon instead of being surprised by him

He was walking along the path before me with his eyes on the ground—walking so slowly

and with his lean frame so bent that I might have supposed him ill if I had not remarked the steady movement of his head from right to left, and the alert touch with which he now and again displaced a clod of earth or a cluster of leaves. By-and-by he rose stiffly, and looked round him suspiciously; but by that time I had slipped behind a trunk, and was not to be seen; and after a brief interval he went back to his task, stooping over it more closely, if possible, than before, and applying himself with even greater care.

By that time I had made up my mind that he was tracking someone. But whom? I could not make a guess at that. I only knew that the plot was thickening, and began to feel the eagerness of the chase. Of course, if the matter had not to do with Cocheforêt, it was no affair of mine; but though it seemed unlikely that anything could bring him back so soon, he might still be at the bottom of this. And, besides, I felt a natural curiosity. When Clon at last improved his pace, and went on to the village, I took up his task. I called to

mind all the wood-lore I had ever learned, and scanned trodden mould and crushed leaves with eager eyes. But in vain. I could make nothing of it all, and rose at last with an aching back and no advantage.

I did not go on to the village after that, but returned to the house, where I found Madame pacing the garden. She looked up eagerly on hearing my step; and I was mistaken if she was not disappointed — if she had not been expecting someone else. She hid the feeling bravely, however, and met me with a careless word; but she turned to the house more than once while we talked, and she seemed to be all the while on the watch, and uneasy. I was not surprised when Clon's figure presently appeared in the doorway, and she left me abruptly, and went to him. I only felt more certain than before that there was something strange on foot. What it was, and whether it had to do with M. de Cocheforêt, I could not tell. But there it was, and I grew more curious the longer I remained alone.

She came back to me presently, looking thoughtful and a trifle downcast.

'That was Clon, was it not?' I said, studying her face.

'Yes,' she answered. She spoke absently, and did not look at me.

'How does he talk to you?' I asked, speaking a trifle curtly.

As I intended, my tone roused her.

'By signs,' she said.

'Is he—is he not a little mad?' I ventured, I wanted to make her talk and forget herself.

She looked at me with sudden keenness, then dropped her eyes.

You do not like him?' she said, a note of challenge in her voice. 'I have noticed that Monsieur.'

I think he does not like me,' I replied.

'He is less trustful than we are,' she answered naïvely. 'It is natural that he should be. He has seen more of the world.'

That silenced me for a moment, but she did not seem to notice it.

'I was looking for him a little while ago, and I could not find him,' I said, after a pause.

'He has been into the village,' she answered.

I longed to pursue the matter further; but though she seemed to entertain no suspicion of me, I dared not run the risk. I tried her, instead, on another tack.

'Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt does not seem very well to-day?' I said.

'No?' she answered carelessly. 'Well, now you speak of it, I do not think that she is. She is often anxious about—one we love.'

She uttered the last words with a little hesitation, and looked at me quickly when she had spoken them. We were sitting at the moment on a stone seat which had the wall of the house for a back; and, fortunately, I was toying with the branch of a creeping plant that hung over it, so that she could not see more than the side of my face. For I knew that it altered. Over my voice, however, I had more control, and I hastened to answer, 'Yes, I suppose so,' as innocently as possible.

'He is at Bosost, in Spain. You knew that, I conclude?' she said, with a certain sharpness. And she looked me in the face again very directly.

'Yes,' I answered, beginning to tremble.

'I suppose you have heard, too, that he—that he sometimes crosses the border?' she continued in a low voice, but with a certain ring of insistence in her tone. 'Or, if you have not heard it, you guess it?'

I was in a quandary, and grew, in one second, hot all over. Uncertain what amount of knowledge I ought to admit, I took refuge in gallantry.

'I should be surprised if he did not,' I answered, with a bow, 'being, as he is, so close, and having such an inducement to return, Madame.'

She drew a long, shivering sigh, at the thought of his peril, I fancied, and she sat back against the wall. Nor did she say any more, though I heard her sigh again. In a moment she rose.

'The afternoons are growing chilly,' she said; 'I will go in and see how Mademoiselle is. Sometimes she does not come to supper. If she cannot descend this evening, I am afraid that you must excuse me too, Monsieur.'

I said what was right, and watched her go in; and, as I did so, I loathed my errand, and the mean contemptible curiosity which it had planted in my mind, more than at any former time. These women — I could find it in my heart to hate them for their frankness, for their foolish confidence, and the silly trustfulness that made them so easy a prey!

Nom de Dieu! What did the woman mean by telling me all this? To meet me in such a way, to disarm one by such methods, was to take an unfair advantage. It put a vile—ay, the vilest—aspect, on the work I had to do.

Yet it was very odd! What could M. de Cocheforêt mean by returning so soon, if M. de Cocheforêt was here? And, on the other hand, if it was not his unexpected presence that had so upset the house, what was the secret? Whom

had Clon been tracking? And what was the cause of Madame's anxiety? In a few minutes I began to grow curious again; and, as the ladies did not appear at supper, I had leisure to give my brain full licence, and, in the course of an hour, thought of a hundred keys to the mystery. But none exactly fitted the lock, or laid open the secret.

A false alarm that evening helped to puzzle me still more. I was sitting about an hour after supper, on the same seat in the garden—I had my cloak and was smoking—when Madame came out like a ghost, and, without seeing me, flitted away through the darkness toward the stables. For a moment I hesitated, and then I followed her. She went down the path and round the stables, and, so far, I saw nothing strange in her actions; but when she had in this way gained the rear of the west wing, she took a track through the thicket to the east of the house again, and so came back to the garden. This gained, she came up the path and went in through the parlour door, and disappeared—

after making a clear circuit of the house, and not once pausing or looking to right or left! I confess I was fairly baffled. I sank back on the seat I had left, and said to myself that this was the lamest of all conclusions. I was sure that she had exchanged no word with anyone. I was equally sure that she had not detected my presence behind her. Why, then, had she made this strange promenade, alone, unprotected, an hour after nightfall? No dog had bayed, no one had moved, she had not once paused, or listened, like a person expecting a rencontre. I could not make it out. And I came no nearer to solving it, though I lay awake an hour beyond my usual time.

In the morning, neither of the ladies descended to dinner, and I heard that Mademoiselle was not so well. After a lonely meal, therefore—I missed them more than I should have supposed—I retired to my favourite seat and fell to meditating.

The day was fine, and the garden pleasant. Sitting there with my eyes on the old-fashioned

herb-beds, with the old-fashioned scents in the air, and the dark belt of trees bounding the view on either side, I could believe that I had been out of Paris not three weeks, but three months. The quiet lapped me round. I could fancy that I had never loved anything else. The wood-doves cooed in the stillness; occasionally the harsh cry of a jay jarred the silence. It was an hour after noon, and hot. I think I nodded.

On a sudden, as if in a dream, I saw Clon's face peering at me round the angle of the parlour door. He looked, and in a moment withdrew, and I heard whispering. The door was gently closed. Then all was still again.

But I was wide awake now, and thinking. Clearly the people of the house wished to assure themselves that I was asleep and safely out of the way. As clearly, it was to my interest to be in the way. Giving place to the temptation, I rose quietly, and, stooping below the level of the windows, slipped round the east end of the house, passing between it and the great yew hedge. Here I found all still and no one stirring; so, keeping

a wary eye about me, I went on round the house —reversing the route which Madame had taken the night before—until I gained the rear of the stables. Here I had scarcely paused a second to scan the ground before two persons came out of the stable-court. They were Madame and the porter.

They stood a brief while outside and looked up and down. Then Madame said something to the man, and he nodded. Leaving him standing where he was, she crossed the grass with a quick, light step, and vanished among the trees.

In a moment my mind was made up to follow; and, as Clon turned at once and went in, I was able to do so before it was too late. Bending low among the shrubs, I ran hotfoot to the point where Madame had entered the wood. Here I found a narrow path, and ran nimbly along it, and presently saw her grey robe fluttering among the trees before me. It only remained to keep out of her sight and give her no chance of discovering that she was followed; and this I set myself to do.

Once or twice she glanced round, but the wood was of beech, the light which passed between the leaves was mere twilight, and my clothes were dark-coloured. I had every advantage, therefore, and little to fear as long as I could keep her in view and still remain myself at such a distance that the rustle of my tread would not disturb her.

Assured that she was on her way to meet her husband, whom my presence kept from the house, I felt that the crisis had come at last, and I grew more excited with each step I took. I detested the task of watching her; it filled me with peevish disgust. But in proportion as I hated it I was eager to have it done and be done with it, and succeed, and stuff my ears and begone from the scene. When she presently came to the verge of the beech wood, and, entering a little open clearing, seemed to loiter, I went cautiously. This, I thought, must be the rendezvous; and I held back warily, looking to see him step out of the thicket.

But he did not, and by-and-by she quickened

her pace. She crossed the open and entered a wide ride cut through a low, dense wood of alder and dwarf oak—a wood so closely planted and so intertwined with hazel and elder and box that the branches rose like a solid wall, twelve feet high, on either side of the track.

Down this she passed, and I stood and watched her go, for I dared not follow. The ride stretched away as straight as a line for four or five hundred yards, a green path between green walls. To enter it was to be immediately detected, if she turned; while the thicket itself permitted no passage. I stood baffled and raging, and watched her pass along. It seemed an age before she at last reached the end, and, turning sharply to the right, was in an instant gone from sight.

I waited then no longer. I started off, and, running as lightly and quietly as I could, I sped down the green alley. The sun shone into it, the trees kept off the wind, and between heat and haste I sweated finely. But the turf was soft, and the ground fell slightly, and in little more than I minute I gained the end. Fifty yards short of

the turning I stopped, and, stealing on, looked cautiously the way she had gone.

I saw before me a second ride, the twin of the other, and a hundred and fifty paces down it her grey figure tripping on between the green hedges. I stood and took breath, and cursed the wood and the heat and Madame's wariness. We must have come a league, or two-thirds of a league, at least. How far did the man expect her to plod to meet him? I began to grow angry. There is moderation even in the cooking of eggs, and this wood might stretch into Spain, for all I knew!

Presently she turned the corner and was gone again, and I had to repeat my manœuvre. This time, surely, I should find a change. But no! Another green ride stretched away into the depths of the forest, with hedges of varying shades — here light and there dark, as hazel and elder, or thorn, and yew and box prevailed — but always high and stiff and impervious. Halfway down the ride Madame's figure tripped steadily on, the only moving

thing in sight. I wondered, stood, and, when she vanished, followed—only to find that she had entered another track, a little narrower but in every other respect alike.

And so it went on for quite half an hour. Sometimes Madame turned to the right, sometimes to the left. The maze seemed to be endless. Once or twice I wondered whether she had lost her way, and was merely seeking to return. But her steady, purposeful gait, her measured pace, forbade the idea. I noticed, too, that she seldom looked behind her—rarely to right or left. Once the ride down which she passed was carpeted not with green, but with the silvery, sheeny leaves of some creeping plant that in the distance had a shimmer like that of water at evening. As she trod this, with her face to the low sun, her tall grey figure had a pure air that for the moment startled me—she looked unearthly. Then I swore in scorn of myself, and at the next corner I had my reward. She was no longer walking on. She had

stopped, I found, and seated herself on a fallen tree that lay in the ride.

For some time I stood in ambush watching her, and with each minute I grew more impatient. At last I began to doubt—to have strange thoughts. The green walls were growing dark. The sun was sinking; a sharp, white peak, miles and miles away, which closed the vista of the ride, began to flush and colour rosily. Finally, but not before I had had leisure to grow uneasy, she stood up and walked on more slowly. I waited, as usual, until the next turning hid her. Then I hastened after her, and, warily passing round the corner—came face to face with her!

I knew all in a moment—saw all in a flash: that she had fooled me, tricked me, lured me away. Her face was white with scorn, her eyes blazed; her figure, as she confronted me, trembled with anger and infinite contempt.

'You spy!' she cried. 'You hound! You —gentleman! Oh, *mon Dieu!* if you are one of us—if you are really not of the *canaille*—we

"You Spy!" she cried. "You Hound!" "You Gentleman!"

shall pay for this some day! We shall pay a heavy reckoning in the time to come! I did not think,' she continued, and her every syllable was like the lash of a whip, 'that there was anything so vile as you in this world!'

I stammered something — I do not know what. Her words burned into me — into my heart! Had she been a man, I would have struck her dead!

'You thought that you deceived me yesterday,' she continued, lowering her tone, but with no lessening of the passion, the contempt, the indignation, which curled her lip and gave fulness to her voice. 'You plotter! You surface trickster! You thought it an easy task to delude a woman — you find yourself deluded. God give you shame that you may suffer!' she continued mercilessly. 'You talked of Clon, but Clon beside you is the most spotless, the most honourable of men!'

'Madame,' I said hoarsely—and I know that my face was grey as ashes—'let us understand one another.'

'God forbid!' she cried on the instant. 'I would not soil myself!'

'Fie! Madame,' I said, trembling. 'But then, you are a woman. That should cost a man his life!'

She laughed bitterly.

'You say well,' she retorted. 'I am not a man—and if you are one, thank God for it. Neither am I Madame. Madame de Cocheforêt has spent this afternoon—thanks to your absence and your imbecility—with her husband. Yes, I hope that hurts you!' she went on, savagely snapping her little white teeth together. 'I hope that stings you; to spy and do vile work, and do it ill, Monsieur Mouchard—Monsieur de Mouchard, I should say—I congratulate you!'

'You are not Madame de Cocheforêt?' I cried, stunned, even in the midst of my shame and rage, by this blow.

'No, Monsieur!' she answered grimly. 'I am not! I am not. And permit me to point out—for we do not all lie easily—that I never

said I was. You deceived yourself so skilfully that we had no need to trick you.'

'Mademoiselle, then?' I muttered.

'Is Madame!' she cried. 'Yes, and I am Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt. And in that character, and in all others, I beg from this moment to close our acquaintance, sir. When we meet again—if we ever do meet, which God forbid!' she went on, her eyes sparkling—'do not presume to speak to me, or I will have you flogged by the grooms. And do not stain our roof by sleeping under it again. You may lie to-night in the inn. It shall not be said that Cocheforêt,' she continued proudly, 'returned even treachery with inhospitality; and I will give orders to that end. But to-morrow begone back to your master, like the whipped cur you are! Spy and coward!'

With those last words she moved away. I would have said something, I could almost have found it in my heart to stop her and make her hear. Nay, I had dreadful thoughts; for I was the stronger, and I might have done with

her as I pleased. But she swept by me so fearlessly, as I might pass some loathsome cripple on the road, that I stood turned to stone. Without looking at me, without turning her head to see whether I followed or remained or what I did, she went steadily down the track until the trees and the shadow and the growing darkness hid her grey figure from me; and I found myself alone.

CHAPTER V

REVENGE

AND full of black rage! Had she only reproached me, or, turning on me in the hour of *my* victory, said all that she had now said in the moment of her own, I could have borne it. She might have shamed me then, and I might have taken the shame to myself and forgiven her. But, as it was, I stood there in the gathering dusk, between the darkening hedges, baffled, tricked, defeated! And by a woman! She had pitted her wits against mine, her woman's will against my experience, and she had come off the victor. And then she had reviled me! As I took it all in, and began to comprehend also the more remote results, and how completely her move

had made further progress on my part impossible, I hated her. She had tricked me with her gracious ways and her slow-coming smile. And, after all—for what she had said—it was this man's life or mine. What had I done that another man would not do? *Mon Dieu!* in the future there was nothing I would not do. I would make her smart for those words of hers! I would bring her to her knees!

Still, hot as I was, an hour might have restored me to coolness. But when I started to return, I fell into a fresh rage, for I remembered that I did not know my way out of the maze of rides and paths into which she had drawn me; and this and the mishaps which followed, kept my rage hot. For a full hour I wandered in the wood, unable, though I knew where the village lay, to find any track which led continuously in one direction. Whenever, at the end of each attempt, the thicket brought me up short, I fancied that I heard her laughing on the farther side of the brake; and the ignominy of this chance punishment, and the

check which the confinement placed on my rage, almost maddened me. In the darkness I fell, and rose cursing; I tore my hands with thorns; I stained my suit, which had suffered sadly once before. At length, when I had almost resigned myself to lie in the wood, I caught sight of the lights of the village, and, trembling between haste and anger, pressed towards them. In a few minutes I stood in the little street.

The lights of the inn shone only fifty yards away; but before I could show myself even there pride suggested that I should do something to repair my clothes. I stopped, and scraped and brushed them; and, at the same time, did what I could to compose my features. Then I advanced to the door and knocked. Almost on the instant the landlord's voice cried from the inside, 'Enter, Monsieur!'

I raised the latch and went in. The man was alone, squatting over the fire warming his hands. A black pot simmered on the ashes. As I entered he raised the lid and

peeped inside. Then he glanced over his shoulder.

'You expected me?' I said defiantly, walking to the hearth, and setting one of my damp boots on the logs.

'Yes,' he answered, nodding curtly. 'Your supper is just ready. I thought that you would be in about this time.'

He grinned as he spoke, and it was with difficulty I suppressed my wrath.

'Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt told you,' I said, affecting indifference, 'where I was?'

'Ay, Mademoiselle—or Madame,' he replied, grinning afresh.

So she had told him; where she had left me, and how she had tricked me! She had made me the village laughing-stock! My rage flashed out afresh at the thought, and, at the sight of his mocking face, I raised my fist.

But he read the threat in my eyes, and was up in a moment, snarling, with his hand on his knife.

'Not again, Monsieur!' he cried, in his

vile patois. 'My head is sore still. Raise your hand, and I will rip you up as I would a pig!'

'Sit down, fool,' I said. 'I am not going to harm you. Where is your wife?'

'About her business.'

'Which should be getting my supper,' I retorted.

He rose sullenly, and, fetching a platter, poured the mess of broth and vegetables into it. Then he went to a cupboard and brought out a loaf of black bread and a measure of wine, and set them also on the table.

'You see it,' he said laconically.

'And a poor welcome!' I replied.

He flamed into sudden passion at that. Leaning with both his hands on the table, he thrust his rugged face and blood-shot eyes close to mine. His moustachios bristled his beard trembled.

'Hark ye, sirrah!' he muttered, with sullen emphasis, 'be content! I have my suspicions. And if it were not for my lady's orders I would put a knife into you, fair or foul, this very

night. You would lie snug outside, instead of inside, and I do not think anyone would be the worse. But as it is, be content. Keep a still tongue; and when you turn your back on Cocheforêt to-morrow keep it turned.'

'Tut! tut!' I said—but I confess that I was a little out of countenance. 'Threatened men live long, you rascal!'

'In Paris!' he answered significantly. 'Not here, Monsieur.'

He straightened himself with that, nodded once, and went back to the fire; and I shrugged my shoulders and began to eat, affecting to forget his presence. The logs on the hearth burned sullenly, and gave no light. The poor oil-lamp, casting weird shadows from wall to wall, served only to discover the darkness. The room, with its low roof and earthen floor, and foul clothes flung here and there, reeked of stale meals and garlic and vile cooking. I thought of the parlour at Cocheforêt, and the dainty table, and the stillness, and the scented pot-herbs; and though I was too old a soldier

to eat the worse because my spoon lacked washing, I felt the change, and laid it savagely at Mademoiselle's door.

The landlord, watching me stealthily from his place by the hearth, read my thoughts and chuckled aloud.

'Palace fare, palace manners!' he muttered scornfully. 'Set a beggar on horseback, and he will ride—back to the inn!'

'Keep a civil tongue, will you!' I answered, scowling at him.

'Have you finished?' he retorted.

I rose, without deigning to reply, and, going to the fire, drew off my boots, which were wet through. He, on the instant, swept off the wine and loaf to the cupboard, and then, coming back for the platter I had used, took it, opened the back door, and went out, leaving the door ajar. The draught which came in beat the flame of the lamp this way and that, and gave the dingy, gloomy room an air still more miserable. I rose angrily from the fire, and went to the door, intending to close it with a bang.

But when I reached it, I saw something, between door and jamb, which stayed my hand. The door led to a shed in which the housewife washed pots and the like. I felt some surprise, therefore, when I found a light there at this time of night; still more surprise when I saw what she was doing.

She was seated on the mud floor, with a rush-light before her, and on either side of her a high-piled heap of refuse and rubbish. From one of these, at the moment I caught sight of her, she was sorting things—horrible filthy sweepings of road or floor—to the other; shaking and sifting each article as she passed it across, and then taking up another and repeating the action with it, and so on—all minutely, warily, with an air of so much patience and persistence that I stood wondering. Some things—rags—she held up between her eyes and the light, some she passed through her fingers, some she fairly tore in pieces. And all the time her husband stood watching her greedily, my platter still in his hand, as if her strange occupation fascinated him.

I stood looking, also, for half a minute, perhaps; then the man's eye, raised for a single second to the doorway, met mine. He started, muttered something to his wife, and, quick as thought, he kicked the light out, leaving the shed in darkness. Cursing him for an ill-conditioned fellow, I walked back to the fire, laughing. In a twinkling he followed me, his face dark with rage.

'*Ventre-saint-gris!*' he exclaimed, thrusting himself close to me. 'Is not a man's house his own?'

'It is, for me,' I answered coolly, shrugging my shoulders. 'And his wife: if she likes to pick dirty rags at this hour, that is your affair.'

'Pig of a spy!' he cried, foaming with rage.

I was angry enough at bottom, but I had nothing to gain by quarrelling with the fellow; and I curtly bade him remember himself.

'Your mistress gave you orders,' I said contemptuously. 'Obey them.'

He spat on the floor, but at the same time he grew calmer.

'You are right there,' he answered spitefully. 'What matter, after all, since you leave to-morrow

at six? Your horse has been sent down, and your baggage is above.'

'I will go to it,' I retorted. 'I want none of your company. Give me a light, fellow!'

He obeyed reluctantly, and, glad to turn my back on him, I went up the ladder, still wondering faintly, in the midst of my annoyance, what his wife was about that my chance detection of her had so enraged him. Even now he was not quite himself. He followed me with abuse, and, deprived by my departure of any other means of showing his spite, fell to shouting through the floor, bidding me remember six o'clock, and be stirring; with other taunts, which did not cease until he had tired himself out.

The sight of my belongings—which I had left a few hours before at the Château—strewn about the floor of this garret, went some way towards firing me again. But I was worn out. The indignities and mishaps of the evening had, for once, crushed my spirit, and after swearing an oath or two I began to pack my bags. Vengeance I would have; but the time and manner

I left for daylight thought. Beyond six o'clock in the morning I did not look forward; and if I longed for anything it was for a little of the good Armagnac I had wasted on those louts of merchants in the kitchen below. It might have done me good now.

I had wearily strapped up one bag, and nearly filled the other, when I came upon something which did, for the moment, rouse the devil in me. This was the tiny orange-coloured sachet which Mademoiselle had dropped the night I first saw her at the inn, and which, it will be remembered, I picked up. Since that night I had not seen it, and had as good as forgotten it. Now, as I folded up my other doublet, the one I had then been wearing, it dropped from my pocket.

The sight of it recalled all — that night, and Mademoiselle's face in the lantern light, and my fine plans, and the end of them; and, in a fit of childish fury, the outcome of long suppressed passion, I snatched up the sachet from the floor and tore it across and across, and flung the pieces down. As they fell, a cloud of fine

pungent dust burst from them, and with the dust, something more solid, which tinkled sharply on the boards, as it fell. I looked down to see what this was—perhaps I already repented of my act; but for a moment I could see nothing. The floor was grimy and uninviting, the light bad.

In certain moods, however, a man is obstinate about small things, and I moved the taper nearer. As I did so, a point of light, a flashing sparkle that shone for a second among the dirt and refuse on the floor, caught my eye. It was gone in a moment, but I had seen it. I stared, and moved the light again, and the spark flashed out afresh, this time in a different place. Much puzzled, I knelt, and, in a twinkling, found a tiny crystal. Hard by it lay another—and another; each as large as a fair-sized pea. I took up the three, and rose to my feet again, the light in one hand, the crystals in the palm of the other.

They were diamonds! Diamonds of price! I knew it in a moment. As I moved the taper to

and fro above them, and watched the fire glow and tremble in their depths, I knew that I held in my hand that which would buy the crazy inn and all its contents a dozen times over! They were diamonds! Gems so fine, and of so rare a water—or I had never seen gems—that my hand trembled as I held them, and my head grew hot and my heart beat furiously. For a moment I thought that I dreamed, that my fancy played me some trick; and I closed my eyes and did not open them again for a minute. But when I did, there they were, hard, real, and angular. Convinced at last, in a maze of joy and fear, I closed my hand upon them, and, stealing on tip-toe to the trap-door, laid first my saddle on it and then my bags, and over all my cloak, breathing fast the while.

Then I stole back, and, taking up the light again, began to search the floor, patiently, inch by inch, with naked feet, every sound making me tremble as I crept hither and thither over the creaking boards. And never was search more successful or better paid. In the fragments

of the sachet I found six smaller diamonds and and a pair of rubies. Eight large diamonds I found on the floor. One, the largest and last found, had bounded away, and lay against the wall in the farthest corner. It took me an hour to run that one to earth; but afterwards I spent another hour on my hands and knees before I gave up the search, and, satisfied at last that I had collected all, sat down on my saddle on the trap-door, and, by the last flickering light of a candle which I had taken from my bag, gloated over my treasure — a treasure worthy of fabled Golconda.

Hardly could I believe in its reality, even now. Recalling the jewels which the English Duke of Buckingham wore on the occasion of his visit to Paris in 1625, and whereof there was so much talk, I took these to be as fine, though less in number. They should be worth fifteen thousand crowns, more or less. Fifteen thousand crowns! And I held them in the hollow of my hand—I, who was scarcely worth ten thousand sous.

The candle going out cut short my admiration. Left in the dark with these precious atoms, my first thought was how I might dispose of them safely; which I did, for the time, by secreting them in the lining of my boot. My second thought turned on the question how they had come where I had found them, among the powdered spice and perfumes in Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt's sachet.

A minute's reflection enabled me to come very near the secret, and at the same time shed a flood of light on several dark places. What Clon had been seeking on the path between the house and the village, what the goodwife of the inn had sought among the sweepings of yard and floor, I knew now—the sachet. I knew, too, what had caused the marked and sudden anxiety I had noticed at the Château—the loss of this sachet.

And there for a while I came to a check. But one step more up the ladder of thought brought all in view. In a flash I guessed how the jewels had come to be in the sachet; and

that it was not Mademoiselle but M. de Cocheforêt who had mislaid them. I thought this last discovery so important that I began to pace the room softly, unable, in my excitement, to remain still.

Doubtless he had dropped the jewels in the hurry of his start from the inn that night! Doubtless, too, he had carried them in that bizarre hiding-place for the sake of safety, considering it unlikely that robbers, if he fell into their hands, would take the sachet from him; as still less likely that they would suspect it to contain anything of value. Everywhere it would pass for a love-gift, the work of his mistress.

Nor did my penetration stop there. I guessed that the gems were family property, the last treasure of the house; and that M. de Cocheforêt, when I saw him at the inn, was on his way to convey them out of the country; either to secure them from seizure by the Government, or to raise money by selling them—money to be spent in some last desperate enterprise.

For a day or two, perhaps, after leaving Cocheforêt, while the mountain road and its chances occupied his thoughts, he had not discovered his loss. Then he had searched for the precious sachet, missed it, and returned hot-foot on his tracks

The longer I considered the circumstances the more certain I was that I had hit on the true solution; and all that night I sat wakeful in the darkness, pondering what I should do. The stones, unset as they were, could never be identified, never be claimed. The channel by which they had come to my hands could never be traced. To all intents they were mine; mine, to do with as I pleased! Fifteen thousand crowns, perhaps twenty thousand crowns, and I to leave at six in the morning, whether I would or no! I might leave for Spain with the jewels in my pocket. Why not?

I confess I was tempted. And indeed the gems were so fine that I doubt not some indifferently honest men would have sold salvation for them. But—a Berault his honour? No. I was tempted,

I say; but not for long. Thank God, a man may be reduced to living by the fortunes of the dice, and may even be called by a woman 'spy' and 'coward,' without becoming a thief! The temptation soon left me—I take credit for it—and I fell to thinking of this and that plan for making use of them. Once it occurred to me to take the jewels to the Cardinal and buy my pardon with them; again, to use them as a trap to capture Cocheforêt; again, to—and then, about five in the morning, as I sat up on my wretched pallet, while the first light stole slowly in through the cobwebbed, hay-stuffed lattice, there came to me the real plan, the plan of plans, on which I acted.

It charmed me. I smacked my lips over it, and hugged myself, and felt my eyes dilate in the darkness, as I conned it. It seemed cruel, it seemed mean; I cared nothing. Mademoiselle had boasted of her victory over me, of her woman's wits and her acuteness; and of my dulness. She had said that her grooms should flog me. She had rated

me as if I had been a dog. Very well; we would see now whose brains were the better, whose was the master mind, whose should be the whipping.

The one thing required by my plan was that I should get speech with her; that done, I could trust myself and my new-found weapon for the rest. But that was absolutely necessary, and, seeing that there might be some difficulty about it, I determined to descend as if my mind were made up to go; then, on pretence of saddling my horse, I would slip away on foot, and lie in wait near the Château until I saw her come out. Or if I could not effect my purpose in that way — either by reason of the landlord's vigilance, or for any other cause—my course was still easy. I would ride away, and when I had proceeded a mile or so, tie up my horse in the forest and return to the wooden bridge. Thence I could watch the garden and front of the Château until time and chance gave me the opportunity I sought.

So I saw my way quite clearly; and when the fellow below called me, reminding me rudely that I must be going, and that it was six o'clock, I was ready with my answer. I shouted sulkily that I was coming, and, after a decent delay, I took up my saddle and bags and went down.

Viewed by the light of a cold morning, the inn room looked more smoky, more grimy, more wretched than when I had last seen it. The goodwife was not visible. The fire was not lighted. No provision, not so much as a stirrup-cup or bowl of porridge cheered the heart.

I looked round, sniffing the stale smell of last night's lamp, and grunted.

'Are you going to send me out fasting?' I said, affecting a worse humour than I felt.

The landlord was standing by the window, stooping over a great pair of frayed and furrowed thigh-boots which he was labouring to soften with copious grease.

'Mademoiselle ordered no breakfast,' he answered, with a malicious grin.

OUTSIDE THE DOOR, IN THE ROAD, SITTING ON HORSEBACK IN SILENCE, WERE TWO MEN.

'Well, it does not much matter,' I replied grandly. 'I shall be at Auch by noon.'

'That is as may be,' he answered with another grin.

I did not understand him, but I had something else to think about, and I opened the door and stepped out, intending to go to the stable. Then in a second I comprehended. The cold air laden with woodland moisture met me and went to my bones; but it was not that which made me shiver. Outside the door, in the road, sitting on horseback in silence, were two men. One was Clon. The other, who held a spare horse by the rein—my horse—was a man I had seen at the inn, a rough, shock-headed, hard-bitten fellow. Both were armed, and Clon was booted. His mate rode barefoot, with a rusty spur strapped to one heel.

The moment I saw them a sure and certain fear crept into my mind: it was that which made me shiver. But I did not speak to them. I went in again and closed the door behind me. The landlord was putting on his boots.

'What does this mean?' I said hoarsely—though I had a clear prescience of what was coming. 'Why are these men here?'

'Orders,' he answered laconically.

'Whose orders?' I retorted.

'Whose?' he answered bluntly. 'Well, Monsieur, that is my business. Enough that we mean to see you out of the country, and out of harm's way.'

'But if I will not go?' I cried.

'Monsieur will go,' he answered coolly. 'There are no strangers in the village to-day,' he added, with a significant smile.

'Do you mean to kidnap me?' I replied, in a rage.

But behind the rage was something else—I will not call it terror, for the brave feel no terror—but it was near akin to it. I had had to do with rough men all my life, but there was a grimness and truculence in the aspect of these three that shook me. When I thought of the dark paths and narrow lanes and cliff sides we must traverse, whichever road we took, I trembled.

'Kidnap you, Monsieur?' he answered, with an every-day air. 'That is as you please to call it. One thing is certain, however,' he continued, maliciously touching an arquebuss which he had brought out, and set upright against a chair while I was at the door; 'if you attempt the slightest resistance, we shall know how to put an end to it, either here or on the road.'

I drew a deep breath, the very imminence of the danger restoring me to the use of my faculties. I changed my tone and laughed aloud.

'So that is your plan, is it?' I said. 'The sooner we start the better, then. And the sooner I see Auch and your back turned, the more I shall be pleased.'

He rose. 'After you, Monsieur,' he said.

I could not restrain a slight shiver. His newborn politeness alarmed me more than his threats. I knew the man and his ways, and I was sure that it boded ill to me.

But I had no pistols, and only my sword and knife, and I knew that resistance at this

point must be worse than vain. I went out jauntily, therefore, the landlord coming after me with my saddle and bags.

The street was empty, save for the two waiting horsemen who sat in their saddles looking doggedly before them. The sun had not yet risen, the air was raw. The sky was grey, cloudy, and cold. My thoughts flew back to the morning on which I had found the sachet—at that very spot, almost at that very hour; and for a moment I grew warm again at the thought of the little packet I carried in my boot. But the landlord's dry manner, the sullen silence of his two companions, whose eyes steadily refused to meet mine, chilled me again. For an instant the impulse to refuse to mount, to refuse to go, was almost irresistible; then, knowing the madness of such a course, which might, and probably would, give the men the chance they desired, I crushed it down and went slowly to my stirrup.

'I wonder you do not want my sword,' I said by way of sarcasm, as I swung myself up.

'We are not afraid of it,' the innkeeper

answered gravely. 'You may keep it—for the present.'

I made no answer—what answer had I to make?—and we rode at a footpace down the street; he and I leading, Clon and the shock-headed man bringing up the rear. The leisurely mode of our departure, the absence of hurry or even haste, the men's indifference whether they were seen, or what was thought, all served to sink my spirits and deepen my sense of peril. I felt that they suspected me, that they more than half guessed the nature of my errand at Cocheforêt, and that they were not minded to be bound by Mademoiselle's orders. In particular, I augured the worst from Clon's appearance. His lean malevolent face and sunken eyes, his very dumbness chilled me. Mercy had no place there.

We rode soberly, so that nearly half an hour elapsed before we gained the brow from which I had taken my first look at Cocheforêt. Among the dwarf oaks whence I had viewed the valley we paused to breathe our horses, and the strange

feelings with which I looked back on the scene may be imagined. But I had short time for indulging in sentiment or recollections. A curt word, and we were moving again.

A quarter of a mile farther on, the road to Auch dipped into the valley. When we were already half way down this descent the innkeeper suddenly stretched out his hand and caught my rein.

'This way!' he said.

I saw that he would have me turn into a by-path leading south-westwards—a mere track, faint and little trodden and encroached on by trees, which led I knew not whither. I checked my horse.

'Why?' I said rebelliously. 'Do you think I do not know the road? The road we are in is the way to Auch.'

'To Auch—yes,' he answered bluntly. 'But we are not going to Auch.'

'Whither then?' I said angrily.

'You will see presently,' he replied with an ugly smile.

'Yes, but I will know now!' I retorted, passion

getting the better of me. 'I have come so far with you. You will find it more easy to take me farther if you tell me your plans.'

'You are a fool!' he cried with a snarl.

'Not so,' I answered. 'I ask only to know whither I am going.'

'Into Spain,' he said. 'Will that satisfy you?'

'And what will you do with me there?' I asked, my heart giving a great bound.

'Hand you over to some friends of ours,' he answered curtly, 'if you behave yourself. If not, there is a shorter way, and one that will save us some travelling. Make up your mind, Monsieur. Which shall it be?'

CHAPTER VI

UNDER THE PIC DU MIDI

SO that was their plan. Two or three hours to the southward, the long, white, glittering wall stretched east and west above the brown woods. Beyond that lay Spain. Once across the border, I might be detained, if no worse happened to me, as a prisoner of war; for we were then at war with Spain on the Italian side. Or I might be handed over to one of the savage bands, half smugglers, half brigands, that held the passes; or be delivered, worse fate of all, into the power of the French exiles, of whom some would be likely to recognise me and cut my throat.

'It is a long way into Spain,' I muttered, watching in a kind of fascination Clon handling his pistols.

'I think you will find the other road longer

still,' the landlord answered grimly. 'But choose, and be quick about it.'

They were three to one, and they had fire-arms. In effect I had no choice.

'Well, if I must I must?' I cried, making up my mind with seeming recklessness. '*Vogue la galère!* Spain be it. It will not be the first time I have heard the dons talk.'

The men nodded, as much as to say that they had known what the end would be; the landlord released my rein; and in a trice we were riding down the narrow track, with our faces set towards the mountains.

On one point my mind was now more easy. The men meant fairly by me, and I had no longer to fear, as I had feared, a pistol-shot in the back at the first convenient ravine. As far as that went, I might ride in peace. On the other hand, if I let them carry me across the border my fate was sealed. A man set down without credentials or guards among the wild desperadoes who swarmed in war-time in the Asturian passes might consider himself fortunate if

an easy death fell to his lot. In my case I could make a shrewd guess what would happen. A single nod of meaning, one muttered word, dropped among the savage men with whom I should be left, and the diamonds hidden in my boot would go neither to the Cardinal nor back to Mademoiselle —nor would it matter to me whither they went.

So while the others talked in their taciturn fashion, or sometimes grinned at my gloomy face, I looked out over the brown woods with eyes that saw yet did not see. The red squirrel swarming up the trunk, the startled pigs that rushed away grunting from their feast of mast, the solitary rider who met us, armed to the teeth, and passed northwards after whispering with the landlord—all these I saw. But my mind was not with them. It was groping and feeling about like a hunted mole for some way of escape. For time pressed. The slope we were on was growing steeper. By-and-by we fell into a southward valley, and began to follow it steadily upwards, crossing and recrossing a swiftly rushing stream. The snow peaks

began to be hidden behind the rising bulk of hills that overhung us, and sometimes we could see nothing before or behind but the wooded walls of our valley rising sheer and green a thousand paces high on either hand; with grey rocks half masked by fern and ivy jutting here and there through the firs and alders.

It was a wild and sombre scene even at that hour, with the mid-day sun shining on the rushing water and drawing the scent out of the pines; but I knew that there was worse to come, and sought desperately for some ruse by which I might at least separate the men. Three were too many; with one I might deal. At last, when I had cudgelled my brain for an hour, and almost resigned myself to a sudden charge on the men single-handed—a last desperate resort—I thought of a plan: dangerous, too, and almost desperate, but which still seemed to promise something. It came of my fingers resting, as they lay in my pocket, on the fragments of the orange sachet; which, without having any particular design in my mind, I had taken care to bring with

me. I had torn the sachet into four pieces—four corners. As I played mechanically with them, one of my fingers fitted into one, as into a glove; a second finger into another. And the plan came.

Before I could move in it, however, I had to wait until we stopped to bait the flagging horses, which we did about noon at the head of the valley. Then, pretending to drink from the stream, I managed to secure unseen a handful of pebbles, slipping them into the same pocket with the morsels of stuff. On getting to horse again, I carefully fitted a pebble, not too tightly, into the largest scrap, and made ready for the attempt.

The landlord rode on my left, abreast of me; the other two knaves behind. The road at this stage favoured me, for the valley, which drained the bare uplands that lay between the lower hills and the base of the real mountains, had become wide and shallow. Here were no trees, and the path was a mere sheep-track covered with short, crisp grass, and running sometimes on this bank of the stream and sometimes on that.

I waited until the ruffian beside me turned to

speak to the men behind. The moment he did so, and his eyes were averted, I slipped out the scrap of satin in which I had placed the pebble, and balancing it carefully on my right thigh as I rode, I flipped it forward with all the strength of my thumb and finger. I meant it to fall a few paces before us in the path, where it could be seen. But alas for my hopes! At the critical moment my horse started, my finger struck the scrap aslant, the pebble flew out, and the bit of stuff fluttered into a whin-bush close to my stirrup—and was lost!

I was bitterly disappointed, for the same thing might happen again, and I had now only three scraps left. But fortune favoured me, by putting it into my neighbour's head to plunge into a hot debate with the shock-headed man on the nature of some animals seen on a distant brow; which he said were izards, while the other maintained that they were common goats. He continued, on this account, to ride with his face turned from me, and I had time to fit another pebble into the second piece of stuff. Sliding it on to my thigh, I poised it, and flipped it.

This time my finger struck the tiny missile fairly in the middle, and shot it so far and so truly that it dropped exactly in the path ten paces in front of us. The moment I saw it fall I kicked my neighbour's nag in the ribs; it started, and he, turning in a rage, hit it. The next instant he pulled it almost on to its haunches.

'*Saint Gris!*' he cried; and sat glaring at the bit of yellow satin, with his face turned purple and his jaw fallen.

'What is it!' I said, staring at him in turn. 'What is the matter, fool?'

'Matter?' he blurted out. '*Mon Dieu!*'

But Clon's excitement surpassed even his. The dumb man no sooner saw what had attracted his comrade's attention, than he uttered an inarticulate and horrible noise, and tumbling off his horse, more like a beast than a man, threw himself bodily on the precious morsel.

The innkeeper was not far behind him. An instant and he was down, too, peering at the thing; and for an instant I thought that they would fight over it. However,

though their jealousy was evident, their excitement cooled a little when they discovered that the scrap of stuff was empty; for, fortunately, the pebble had fallen out of it. Still, it threw them into such a fever of eagerness as it was wonderful to witness. They nosed the ground where it had lain, they plucked up the grass and turf, and passed it through their fingers, they ran to and fro like dogs on a trail; and, glancing askance at one another, came back always together to the point of departure. Neither in his jealousy would suffer the other to be there alone.

The shock-headed man and I sat our horses and looked on; he marvelling, and I pretending to marvel. As the two searched up and down the path, we moved a little out of it to give them space; and presently, when all their heads were turned from me, I let a second morsel drop under a gorse-bush. The shock-headed man, by-and-by, found this, and gave it to Clon; and as from the circumstances of the first dis-

covery no suspicion attached to me, I ventured to find the third and last scrap myself. I did not pick it up, but I called the innkeeper, and he pounced upon it as I have seen a hawk pounce on a chicken.

They hunted for the fourth morsel, but, of course, in vain, and in the end they desisted, and fitted the three they had together; but neither would let his own portion out of his hands, and each looked at the other across the spoil with eyes of suspicion. It was strange to see them in that wide-stretching valley, whence grey boar-backs of hills swelled up into the silence of the snow — it was strange, I say, in that vast solitude, to see these two, mere dots on its bosom, circling round one another in fierce forgetfulness of the outside world, glaring and shifting their ground like cocks about to engage, and wholly engrossed — by three scraps of orange-colour, invisible at fifty paces!

At last the innkeeper cried with an oath, 'I am going back. This must be known

down yonder. Give me your pieces, man, and do you go on with Antoine. It will be all right.'

But Clon, waving a scrap of the staff in either hand, and thrusting his ghastly mask into the other's face, shook his head in passionate denial. He could not speak, but he made it as clear as daylight that if anyone went back with the news, he was the man to go.

'Nonsense!' the landlord rejoined fiercely. 'We cannot leave Antoine to go on alone with him. Give me the stuff.'

But Clon would not. He had no thought of resigning the credit of the discovery; and I began to think that the two would really come to blows. But there was an alternative — an alternative in which I was concerned; and first one and then the other looked at me. It was a moment of peril, and I knew it. My stratagem might react on myself, and the two, to put an end to their difficulty, agree to put an end to me. But I faced them so coolly, and showed so bold a front, and the ground where we stood was so open, that the

idea took no root. They fell to wrangling again more viciously than before. One tapped his gun and the other his pistols. The landlord scolded, the dumb man gurgled. At last their difference ended as I had hoped it would.

'Very well then, we will both go back!' the innkeeper cried in a rage. 'And Antoine must see him on. But the blame be on your head. Do you give the lad your pistols.'

Clon took one pistol, and gave it to the shock-headed man.

'The other!' the innkeeper said impatiently.

But Clon shook his head with a grim smile, and pointed to the arquebuss.

By a sudden movement, the landlord snatched the pistol, and averted Clon's vengeance by placing both it and the gun in the shock-headed man's hands.

'There!' he said, addressing the latter, 'now can you do? If Monsieur tries to escape or turn back, shoot him! But four hours' riding should bring you to the Roca Blanca. You will find the men there, and will have no more to do with it.'

Antoine did not see things quite in that light, however. He looked at me, and then at the wild track in front of us; and he muttered an oath and said he would die if he would.

But the landlord, who was in a frenzy of impatience, drew him aside and talked to him, and in the end seemed to persuade him; for in a few minutes the matter was settled.

Antoine came back, and said sullenly, 'Forward, Monsieur,' the two others stood on one side, I shrugged my shoulders and kicked up my horse, and in a twinkling we two were riding on together—man to man. I turned once or twice to see what those we had left behind were doing, and always found them standing in apparent debate; but my guard showed so much jealousy of these movements that I presently shrugged my shoulders again and desisted.

I had racked my brains to bring about this state of things. Strange to say, now I had succeeded, I found it less satisfactory than I had hoped. I had reduced the odds and got

rid of my most dangerous antagonists; but Antoine, left to himself, proved to be as full of suspicion as an egg of meat. He rode a little behind me, with his gun across his saddle-bow, and a pistol near his hand; and at the slightest pause on my part, or if I turned to look at him, he muttered his constant 'Forward, Monsieur!' in a tone which warned me that his finger was on the trigger. At such a distance he could not miss; and I saw nothing for it but to go on meekly before him to the Roca Blanca—and my fate.

What was to be done? The road presently reached the end of the valley and entered a narrow pine-clad defile, strewn with rocks and boulders, over which the torrent plunged and eddied with a deafening roar. In front the white gleam of waterfalls broke the sombre ranks of climbing trunks. The snow line lay less than half a mile away on either hand; and crowning all — at the end of the pass, as it seemed to the eye — rose the pure white pillar of the Pic du Midi shooting up six thousand

feet into the blue of heaven. Such a scene so suddenly disclosed, was enough to drive the sense of danger from my mind; and for a moment I reined in my horse. But 'Forward Monsieur!' came the grating order. I fell to earth again, and went on. What was to be done?

I was at my wit's end to know. The man refused to talk, refused to ride abreast of me, would have no dismounting, no halting, no communication at all. He would have nothing but this silent, lonely procession of two, with the muzzle of his gun at my back. And meanwhile we were fast climbing the pass. We had left the others an hour — nearly two. The sun was declining; the time, I supposed, about half-past three.

If he would only let me come within reach of him! Or if anything would fall out to take his attention! When the pass presently widened into a bare and dreary valley, strewn with huge boulders and with snow lying here and there in the hollows, I looked desperately before me, and scanned even the vast snow-fields that

overhung us and stretched away to the base or the ice-peak. But I saw nothing. No bear swung across the path, no izard showed itself on the cliffs. The keen, sharp air cut our cheeks and warned me that we were approaching the summit of the ridge. On all sides were silence and desolation.

Mon Dieu! And the ruffians on whose tender mercies I was to be thrown might come to meet us! They might appear at any moment. In my despair I loosened my hat on my head, and let the first gust carry it to the ground, and then with an oath of annoyance tossed my feet from the stirrups to go after it. But the rascal roared to me to keep my seat.

'Forward, Monsieur!' he shouted brutally. 'Go on!'

'But my hat!' I cried. '*Mille tonnerres*, man! I must—'

'Forward, Monsieur, or I shoot!' he replied inexorably raising his gun. 'One—two—'

And I went on. But, ah, I was wrathful! That I, Gil de Berault, should be outwitted, and

led by the nose like a ringed bull, by this Gascon lout! That I, whom all Paris knew and feared—if it did not love—the terror of Zaton's, should come to my end in this dismal waste of snow and rock, done to death by some pitiful smuggler or thief! It must not be. Surely in the last resort I could give an account of one man, though his belt were stuffed with pistols.

But how? Only, it seemed, by open force. My heart began to flutter as I planned it; and then grew steady again. A hundred paces before us a gully or ravine on the left ran up into the snow-field. Opposite its mouth a jumble of stones and broken rocks covered the path. I marked this for the place. The knave would need both his hands to hold up his nag over the stones, and, if I turned on him suddenly enough, he might either drop his gun or fire it harmlessly.

But, in the meantime, something happened; as, at the last moment, things do happen. While we were still fifty yards short of the place, I found his horse's nose creeping forward

on a level with my crupper; and, still advancing, still advancing, until I could see it out of the tail of my eye, and my heart gave a great bound. He was coming abreast of me: he was going to deliver himself into my hands! To cover my excitement, I began to whistle.

'Hush!' he muttered fiercely, his voice sounding so strange and unnatural, that my first thought was that he was ill; and I turned to him. But he only said again,—

'Hush! Pass by here quietly, Monsieur.'

'Why?' I asked mutinously, curiosity getting the better of me. For had I been wise I had taken no notice; every second his horse was coming up with mine. Its nose was level with my stirrup already.

'Hush, man!' he said again. This time there was no mistake about the panic in his voice. 'They call this the Devil's Chapel. God send us safe by it! It is late to be here. Look at those!' he continued, pointing with a finger which visibly shook.

I looked. At the mouth of the gully, in a

small space partly cleared of stones, stood three broken shafts, raised on rude pedestals.

'Well?' I said in a low voice. The sun which was near setting, flushed the great peak above to the colour of blood; but the valley was growing grey and each moment more dreary. 'Well, what of those?' I said.

In spite of my peril and the excitement of the coming struggle I felt the chill of his fear. Never had I seen so grim, so desolate, so God-forsaken a place! Involuntarily I shivered.

'They were crosses,' he muttered in a voice little above a whisper, while his eyes roved this way and that in terror. 'The Curé of Gabas blessed the place, and set them up. But next morning they were as you see them now. Come on, Monsieur; come on!' he continued, plucking at my arm. 'It is not safe here after sunset. Pray God, Satan be not at home!'

He had completely forgotten in his panic that he had anything to fear from me. His gun dropped loosely across his saddle, his leg rubbed mine. I saw this, and I changed my

plan of action. As our horses reached the stones I stooped, as if to encourage mine, and, with a sudden clutch, snatched the gun bodily from his hand, at the same time that I backed my horse with all my strength. It was done in a moment! A second and I had him at the end of the gun, and my finger was on the trigger. Never was victory more easily gained.

He looked at me between rage and terror, his jaw fallen.

'Are you mad?' he cried, his teeth chattering as he spoke. Even in this strait his eyes left me and wandered round in alarm.

'No, sane!' I retorted fiercely. 'But I do not like this place any better than you do.' Which was true enough, if not quite true. 'So, by your right, quick march!' I continued imperatively. 'Turn your horse, my friend, or take the consequences.'

He turned like a lamb, and headed down the valley again, without giving a thought to his pistols. I kept close to him, and in less than a

minute we had left the Devil's Chapel well behind us, and were moving down again as we had come up. Only now I held the gun.

When we had gone half a mile or so—until then I did not feel comfortable myself, and though I thanked heaven that the place existed, I thanked heaven also that I was out of it—I bade him halt.

'Take off your belt,' I said curtly, 'and throw it down. But, mark me, if you turn I fire.'

The spirit was quite gone out of him, and he obeyed mechanically. I jumped down, still covering him with the gun, and picked up the belt, pistols and all. Then I remounted, and we went on. By-and-by he asked me sullenly what I was going to do.

'Go back,' I said, 'and take the road to Auch when I come to it.'

'It will be dark in an hour,' he answered sulkily.

'I know that,' I retorted. 'We must camp and do the best we can.'

And as I said, we did. The daylight held until we gained the skirts of the pine-wood at the head of the pass. Here I chose a corner a little off the track, and well sheltered from the wind, and bade him light a fire. I tethered the horses near this and within sight. Then it remained only to sup. I had a piece of bread; he had another and an onion. We ate in silence, sitting on opposite sides of the fire.

But after supper I found myself in a dilemma; I did not see how I was to sleep. The ruddy light which gleamed on the knave's swart face and sinewy hands showed also his eyes, black, sullen, and watchful. I knew that the man was plotting revenge; that he would not hesitate to plant his knife between my ribs should I give him the chance; and I could find only one alternative to remaining awake. Had I been bloody-minded, I should have chosen it and solved the question at once and in my favour by shooting him as he sat.

But I have never been a cruel man, and I could not find it in my heart to do this. The

silence of the mountain and the sky—which seemed a thing apart from the roar of the torrent and not to be broken by it—awed me. The vastness of the solitude in which we sat, the dark void above, through which the stars kept shooting, the black gulf below in which the unseen waters boiled and surged, the absence of other human company or other signs of human existence, put such a face upon the deed that I gave up the thought of it with a shudder, and resigned myself, instead, to watch through the night—the long, cold, Pyrenean night. Presently he curled himself up like a dog and slept in the blaze, and then for a couple of hours I sat opposite him, thinking. It seemed years since I had seen Zaton's or thrown the dice. The old life, the old employments — should I ever go back to them?—seemed dim and distant. Would Cocheforêt, the forest and the mountain, the grey Château and its mistresses, seem one day as dim? And if one bit of life could fade so quickly at the unrolling of another, and seem in a moment pale and colourless, would all life

some day and somewhere, and all the things we— But enough! I was growing foolish. I sprang up and kicked the wood together, and, taking up the gun, began to pace to and fro under the cliff. Strange that a little moonlight, a few stars, a breath of solitude should carry a man back to childhood and childish things.

. . . . . .

It was three in the afternoon of the next day, and the sun lay hot on the oak groves, and the air was full of warmth as we began to climb the slope, midway up which the road to Auch shoots out of the track. The yellow bracken and the fallen leaves underfoot seemed to throw up light of themselves; and here and there a patch of ruddy beech lay like a bloodstain on the hillside. In front a herd of pigs routed among the mast, and grunted lazily; and high above us a boy lay watching them.

'We part here,' I said to my companion.

It was my plan to ride a little way along the road to Auch so as to blind his eyes; then, leaving my horse in the forest, I would go on foot to the Château.

'The sooner the better!' he answered with a

snarl. 'And I hope I may never see your face again, Monsieur.'

But when we came to the wooden cross at the fork of the roads, and were about to part, the boy we had seen leapt out of the fern and came to meet us.

'Hollo!' he cried in a sing-song tone.

'Well,' my companion answered, drawing rein impatiently. 'What is it?'

'There are soldiers in the village.'

'Soldiers?' Antoine cried incredulously.

'Ay, devils on horseback,' the lad answered, spitting on the ground. 'Three score of them. From Auch.'

Antoine turned to me, his face transformed with fury.

'Curse you!' he cried. 'This is some of your work. Now we are all undone. And my mistresses? *Sacré!* if I had that gun I would shoot you like a rat.'

'Steady, fool,' I answered roughly. 'I know no more of this than you do.'

Which was so true that my surprise was at least as great as his, and better grounded. The Cardinal, who rarely made a change of front,

had sent me hither that he might not be forced to send soldiers, and run the risk of all that might arise from such a movement. What of this invasion, then, than which nothing could be less consistent with his plans? I wondered. It was possible that the travelling merchants, before whom I had played at treason, had reported the facts; and that on this the Commandant at Auch had acted. But it seemed unlikely since he had had his orders too, and under the Cardinal's rule there was small place for individual enterprise. Frankly I could not understand it, and found only one thing clear; I might now enter the village as I pleased.

'I am going on to look into this,' I said to Antoine. 'Come, my man.'

He shrugged his shoulders, and stood still.

'Not I!' he answered, with an oath. 'No soldiers for me! I have lain out one night, and I can lie out another.'

I nodded indifferently, for I no longer wanted him; and we parted. After this, twenty minutes' riding brought me to the entrance of the village,

and here the change was great indeed. Not one of the ordinary dwellers in the place was to be seen: either they had shut themselves up in their hovels, or, like Antoine, they had fled to the woods. Their doors were closed, their windows shuttered. But lounging about the street were a score of dragoons, in boots and breastplates, whose short-barrelled muskets, with pouches and bandoliers attached, were piled near the inn door. In an open space, where there was a gap in the street, a long row of horses, linked head to head, stood bending their muzzles over bundles of rough forage; and on all sides the cheerful jingle of chains and bridles and the sound of coarse jokes and laughter filled the air.

As I rode up to the inn door an old sergeant, with squinting eyes and his tongue in his cheek, scanned me inquisitively, and started to cross the street to challenge me. Fortunately, at that moment the two knaves whom I had brought from Paris with me, and whom I had left at Auch to await my orders, came up. I made them a sign not to speak to me, and they passed on; but

I suppose that they told the sergeant that I was not the man he wanted, for I saw no more of him.

After picketing my horse behind the inn — I could find no better stable, every place being full — I pushed my way through the group at the door, and entered. The old room, with the low, grimy roof and the reeking floor, was half full of strange figures, and for a few minutes I stood unseen in the smoke and confusion. Then the landlord came my way, and as he passed me I caught his eye. He uttered a low curse, dropped the pitcher he was carrying, and stood glaring at me like a man possessed.

The soldier whose wine he was carrying flung a crust in his face, with,—

'Now, greasy fingers! What are you staring at?'

'The devil!' the landlord muttered, beginning to tremble.

'Then let me look at him!' the man retorted, and he turned on his stool.

He started, finding me standing over him.

'At your service!' I said grimly. 'A little time and it will be the other way, my friend.'

CHAPTER VII

A MASTER STROKE

I HAVE a way with me which commonly commands respect; and when the landlord's first terror was over and he would serve me, I managed to get my supper — the first good meal I had had in two days — pretty comfortably in spite of the soldiers' presence. The crowd, too, which filled the room, soon began to melt. The men strayed off in groups to water their horses, or went to hunt up their quarters, until only two or three were left. Dusk had fallen outside; the noise in the street grew less. The firelight began to glow and flicker on the walls, and the wretched room to look as homely as it was in its nature to look. I was pondering for the twentieth time what step I should take next, and questioning why the soldiers were here, and whether I should let

the night pass before I moved, when the door, which had been turning on its hinges almost without pause for an hour, opened again, and a woman came in.

She paused a moment on the threshold looking round, and I saw that she had a shawl on her head and a milk-pitcher in her hand, and that her feet and ankles were bare. There was a great rent in her coarse stuff petticoat, and the hand which held the shawl together was brown and dirty. More I did not see: for, supposing her to be a neighbour stolen in, now that the house was quiet, to get some milk for her child or the like, I took no farther heed of her. I turned to the fire again and plunged into my thoughts.

But to get to the hearth where the goodwife was fidgeting the woman had to pass in front of me; and as she passed I suppose that she stole a look at me from under her shawl. For just when she came between me and the blaze she uttered a low cry and shrank aside—so quickly that she almost stepped on the hearth. The next moment she turned her back to me, and was stooping whis-

One of the Men laughed, and the other began to sing a low Song.

pering in the housewife's ear. A stranger might have thought that she had trodden on a hot ember.

But another idea, and a very strange one, came into my mind; and I stood up silently. The woman's back was towards me, but something in her height, her shape, the pose of her head, hidden as it was by her shawl, seemed familiar. I waited while she hung over the fire whispering, and while the goodwife slowly filled her pitcher out of the great black pot. But when she turned to go, I took a step forward so as to bar her way. And our eyes met.

I could not see her features; they were lost in the shadow of the hood. But I saw a shiver run through her from head to foot. And I knew then that I had made no mistake.

'That is too heavy for you, my girl,' I said familiarly, as I might have spoken to a village wench. 'I will carry it for you.'

One of the men, who remained lolling at the table, laughed, and the other began to sing a low song. The woman trembled in rage or fear, but she kept silence and let me take the jug from

her hands; and when I went to the door and opened it, she followed mechanically. An instant, and the door fell to behind us, shutting off the light and glow, and we two stood together in the growing dusk.

'It is late for you to be out, Mademoiselle,' I said politely. 'You might meet with some rudeness, dressed as you are. Permit me to see you home.'

She shuddered, and I thought that I heard her sob, but she did not answer. Instead, she turned and walked quickly through the village in the direction of the Château, keeping in the shadow of the houses. I carried the pitcher and walked close to her, beside her; and in the dark I smiled. I knew how shame and impotent rage were working in her. This was something like revenge!

Presently I spoke.

'Well, Mademoiselle,' I said, 'where are your grooms?'

She gave me one look, her eyes blazing with anger, her face like hate itself; and after that I said no more, but left her in peace, and contented myself with walking at her shoulder until we came to the end of the village, where the

track to the great house plunged into the wood. There she stopped, and turned on me like a wild creature at bay.

'What do you want?' she cried hoarsely, breathing as if she had been running.

'To see you safe to the house,' I answered coolly. 'Alone you might be insulted.'

'And if I will not?' she retorted.

'The choice does not lie with you, Mademoiselle,' I answered sternly. 'You will go to the house with me, and on the way you will give me an interview—late as it is; but not here. Here we are not private enough. We may be interrupted at any moment, and I wish to speak to you at length.'

'At length?' she muttered.

'Yes, Mademoiselle.'

I saw her shiver. 'What if I will not?' she said again.

'I might call to the nearest soldiers and tell them who you are,' I answered coolly. 'I might do that, but I should not. That were a clumsy way of punishing you, and I know a better way. I should go to the captain, Mademoiselle, and

tell him whose horse is locked up in the inn stable. A trooper told me — as someone had told him — that it belonged to one of his officers ; but I looked through the crack, and I knew the horse again.'

She could not repress a groan. I waited ; still she did not speak.

'Shall I go to the captain?' I said ruthlessly.

She shook the hood back from her face and looked at me.

'Oh, you coward! you coward!' she hissed through her teeth. 'If I had a knife!'

'But you have not, Mademoiselle,' I answered, unmoved. 'Be good enough, therefore, to make up your mind which it is to be. Am I to go with my news to the captain, or am I to come with you?'

'Give me the pitcher,' she said harshly.

I did so, wondering. In a moment she flung it with a savage gesture far into the bushes.

'Come!' she said, 'if you will. But some day God will punish you!'

Without another word she turned and entered the path through the trees, and I followed her. I suppose that every one of its windings, every hollow

and broken place in it had been known to her from childhood, for she followed it swiftly and unerringly, barefoot as she was. I had to walk fast through the darkness to keep up with her. The wood was quiet, but the frogs were beginning to croak in the pool, and their persistent chorus reminded me of the night when I had come to the house-door, hurt and worn out, and Clon had admitted me, and she had stood under the gallery in the hall. Things had looked dark then. I had seen but a very little way ahead then. Now all was plain. The commandant might be here with all his soldiers, but it was I who held the strings.

We came to the little wooden bridge and saw beyond the dark meadows the lights of the house. All the windows were bright. Doubtless the troopers were making merry.

'Now, Mademoiselle,' I said quietly, 'I must trouble you to stop here, and give me your attention for a few minutes. Afterwards you may go your way.'

'Speak!' she said defiantly. 'And be quick! I cannot breathe the air where you are! It poisons me!'

'Ah!' I said slowly. 'Do you think that you make things better by such speeches as those?'

'Oh!' she cried—and I heard her teeth click together. 'Would you have me fawn on you?'

'Perhaps not,' I answered. 'Still you make one mistake.'

'What is it?' she panted.

'You forget that I am to be feared as well as —loathed, Mademoiselle! Ay, Mademoiselle, to be feared!' I continued grimly. 'Do you think that I do not know why you are here in this guise? Do you think that I do not know for whom that pitcher of broth was intended? Or who will now have to fast to-night? I tell you I know all these things. Your house was full of soldiers; your servants were watched and could not leave. You had to come yourself and get food for him!'

She clutched at the handrail of the bridge, and for an instant clung to it for support. Her face, from which the shawl had fallen, glimmered white in the shadow of the trees. At last I had shaken her pride. At last!

'What is your price?' she murmured faintly.

'I am going to tell you,' I replied, speaking so that every word might fall distinctly on her ears, and sating my eyes the while on her proud face. I had never dreamed of such revenge as this! 'About a fortnight ago, M. de Cocheforêt left here at night with a little orange-coloured sachet in his possession.'

She uttered a stifled cry, and drew herself stiffly erect.

'It contained—but there, Mademoiselle, you know its contents,' I went on. 'Whatever they were, M. de Cocheforêt lost it and them at starting. A week ago he came back—unfortunately for himself—to seek them.'

She was looking full in my face now. She seemed scarcely to breathe in the intensity of her surprise and expectation.

'You had a search made, Mademoiselle,' I continued quietly. 'Your servants left no place unexplored. The paths, the roads, the very woods were ransacked. But in vain, because all the while the orange sachet lay whole and unopened in my pocket.'

'No!' she cried impetuously. 'There, you lie,

sir, as usual! The sachet was found, torn open, many leagues from this place!'

'Where I threw it, Mademoiselle,' I replied, 'that I might mislead your rascals and be free to return to you. Oh! believe me,' I continued, letting something of my true self, something of my triumph, appear at last in my voice. 'You have made a mistake! You would have done better had you trusted me. I am no bundle of sawdust, Mademoiselle, though once you got the better of me, but a man; a man with an arm to shield and a brain to serve, and—as I am going to teach you—a heart also!'

She shivered.

'In the orange-coloured sachet that you lost I believe that there were eighteen stones of great value?'

She made no answer, but she looked at me as if I fascinated her. Her very breath seemed to pause and wait on my words. She was so little conscious of anything else, of anything outside ourselves, that a score of men might have come up behind her, unseen and unnoticed.

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